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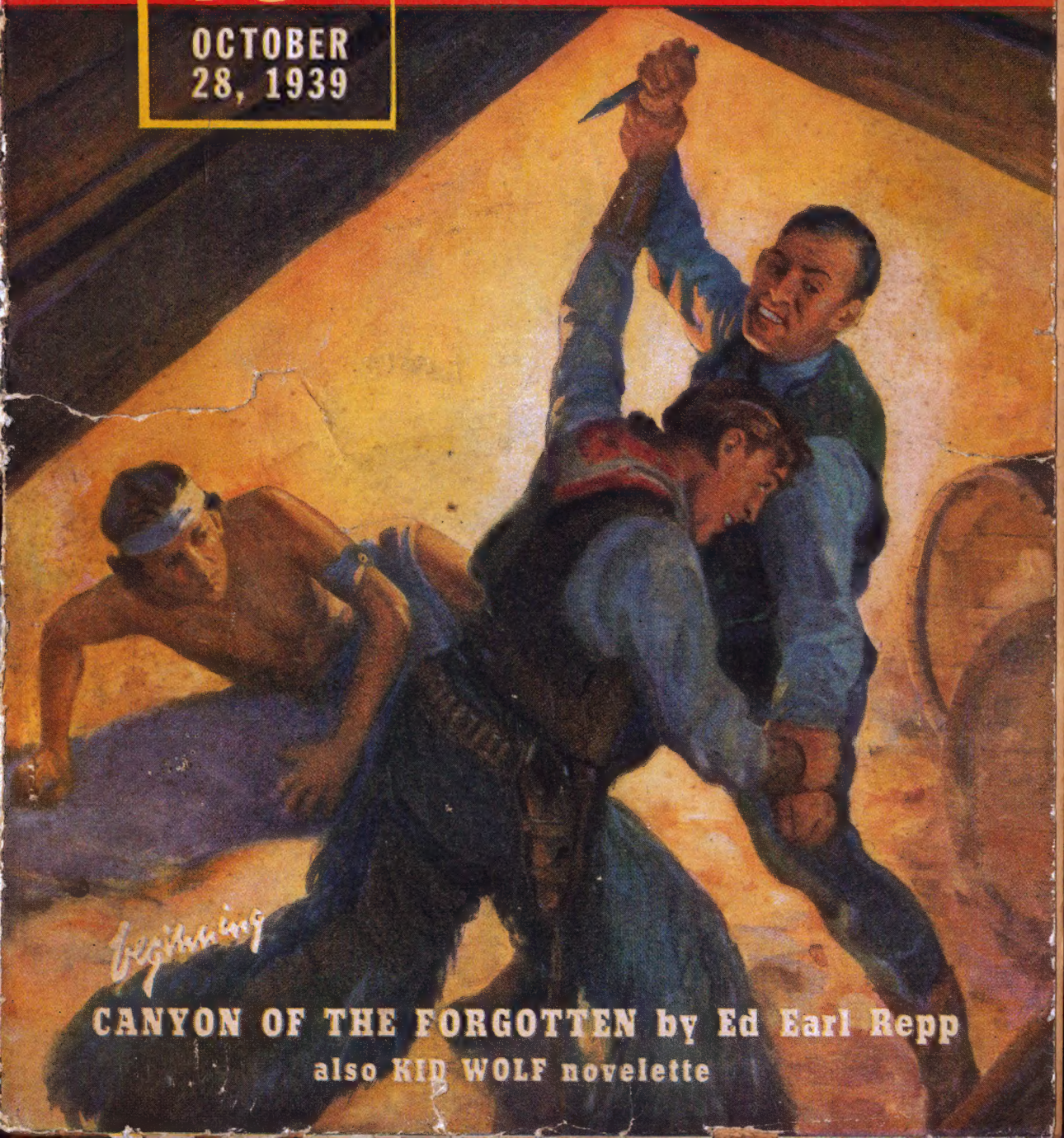
WILD WEST WEEKLY

OCT. 28, '39

10¢

OCTOBER 28, 1939



beginning

CANYON OF THE FORGOTTEN by Ed Earl Repp

also KID WOLF novelette

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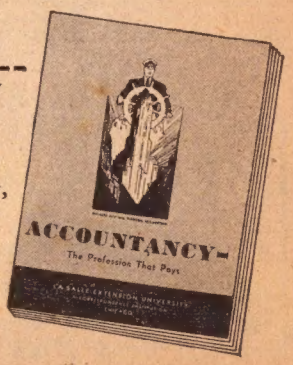

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STREET & SMITH'S FOUNDED 1902

WILD WEST WEEKLY

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COVER BY FREDERICK A. ANDERSON

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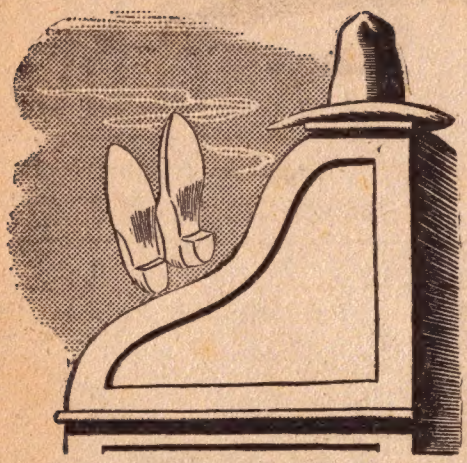

A CHAT WITH THE RANGE BOSS

LEADING off this issue is the first installment of as good a continued novel as has been herded into the 3W corral yet. So I reckon a few words from the author will give you some low-down on the background:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I've ridden the hurricane deck of a good bronc over most of the territory in which "Canyon of the Forgotten" is laid. Like I said before, we got a family ranch out in Mint Canyon, a few miles south o' Palmdale and near the old gold town o' Acton, California. From here I've ridden more durn miles over the Mojave Desert than a leppy has fleas. Mesquite Flats in "Canyon of the Forgotten" is actually the real-life town o' Randsburgh on the Mojave, not far from Death Valley. Coyote Wells is Indian Springs, up near Olancha, in Owens Valley.

I've ridden across the Mojave to Death Valley Scotty's mansion many a time and swapped palaver with the ol' boy and many other famous gold-trail characters whom I've tried to make live in this novel. My Indians come from Last Chance Gulch, near Mojave town, and I have many of their old relics on the walls of my den—arrowheads, stone tomahawks, and such that I found on their stampin' grounds. So most everything in "Canyon of the Forgotten" is true as far as locale and terrain go. Of course, my characters are fictitious, but plenty like 'em still roam Death Valley, leadin' a string o' desert canaries—always searchin' for that will-o'-the-wisp, gold. Here's hopin' they find it! I never could, outside of stuff runnin' ten bucks to the cubic yard—and me bein' a lazy cuss, it's still there waitin' for enough water on the desert to make pannin' less hard wearin' on a gent's backbone!

Yours, ED EARL REPP.

Mighty glad to print your note, Señor Repp. Readers always seem to be interested in hearing about the background of stories in Wild West Weekly. And I know they're going to enjoy this great novel as much as we word-wranglers up here in the office did. It has about everything anyone could ask—romantic background, interesting characters, dramatic plot, plenty of action and color.

The four short stories in this issue include three characters who've been branded with reader approval in the past. Kid Wolf, Salty Seabright, and Bronc Evans have very different personalities, but they have one important thing in common—they're all likable hombres. Leastways, that's my opinion. And you'll find characters even more contrasted in William F. Bragg's novel. Variety, you'd call it.

Just a few words about what's comin' next week. A favorite writer, William A. Todd, leads off with a mighty fine complete short novel called "Gunmen's Gold." Then "White Wolf at Ghost Mine" presents your favorite outlaw in a most unusual and thrilling adventure. On top of those, there's Part Two of Señor Repp's novel and five bang-up short stories, including the Whistlin' Kid and Jeff and Bugeye.

That's enough for now. See you here next week, an' meanwhile keep your ropes dry. *Adios.*

THE RANGE BOSS.

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Part I

CANYON OF THE FORGOTTEN

by ED EARL REPP

Author of "Yuma Bill—Hangnoose Deputy," etc.

CANYON OF THE FORGOTTEN

A shriek that filled the town with sound, a strange Indian arrow whistling from nowhere, a fortune of gold on a burro, and the mystery of that canyon of the devil, engulfs Mesquite Flats!

By Ed Earl Repp

CHAPTER I.

MARKED FOR DEATH.

THERE was firm conviction in the way old Panamint Joe spoke from the open doorway of his blacksmith shop in Mesquite Flat. And there were battle lights flaming in his pale eyes as he drew them from the sun-baked street and probed the sweating face of his young pardner, Bronc Maverick, working the huge bellows in the corner of the room.

"No doubt about it, Bronc," the oldster drawled in a heat-cracked voice. "Ifn we stay here long enough, the jasper with the red whiskers yo're honin' to meet up with will come to Mesquite Flats shore as hosses an' jennies need shoddin' afore hittin' out into the valley."

His eyes swept the tall, stalwart frame of young Bronc and noted that the slab-muscled body tightened a bit at mention of the man with the red beard. It was Bronc's only reply, but Panamint knew turmoil seethed within his pard. He watched him work the bellows, sending sparks flying from the furnace. The lurid light was the same color as his hair, vivid red. His gray-blue eyes were half shut against the heat as he lifted a cherry-red horseshoe from the coals and plucked a heavy hammer from the rack beside the anvil. The shop rang to the swing of his mighty right arm. But his mind was elsewhere.

The valley! He knew Panamint meant Death Valley. That was where the oldster had rescued him after finding him more dead than alive. A deadly, mirthless smile tugged at the sides of his fine mouth as fresh memory of it crossed his mind. He was beginning to doubt if the red-bearded man he sought would ever show up in Mesquite Flat. Then he pushed that thought from him with a stubborn shake of his head. The man would come. He had to come—or Bronc Maverick would never own the name that some proud father and mother had bestowed upon him.

Like a distorted dream, all of the past that he could remember rushed once more across the young smithy's mind. Again he was just a kid wandering in crazy circles on the pitiless salt flats of the valley floor. All that was in the past now, but Bronc could still remember vividly his first sight of Panamint Joe, and his pack mule, Bugle. He had come like a rawhide wraith out of the shimmering heat haze. Bronc could still taste the first drops of life-giving water that had slipped down his swollen throat. Rest and food had restored him physically, but it had not brought back his memory.

Panamint had questioned him, Bronc remembered, as to where he had come from. How he had hap-

pened to be out there alone on the devil's griddle? Had he been with a party of immigrants coming west to California, lured by the magic call of gold on the Sacramento and American rivers? Had they perished? Was he the only survivor?

Questions to which Bronc could only shake his head dumbly. That was all six years behind him now, and it was still all he could do, he realized grimly. He had only been able to tell Panamint Joe one thing. A bearded face, red as Satan's own, was implanted in his memory. Somehow Bronc felt that that face was responsible for his loss of memory. Stubbornly he had kept his opinion for five long years, and old Panamint Joe had agreed with him, backing Bronc's hunch with more than words.

Gratitude surged through him at the thought. "Fella," he said in his clear deep voice without looking up from his task of shaping the shoe, "if we don't find that gent I'm lookin' for, danged if I see how I can ever repay you for all you've done for me. You give up prospectin' on my account, and opened this blacksmith shop, sweatin' in here without a danged complaint when I know the Panamints and Grapevines have called you many a time. Sometime, though, I'll make it up to you for all the goodness you've done wasted on a damned pilgrim without a name."

Panamint Joe still leaned against the door casing where he could keep an eye open for any passing business. "Pshaw, son," he chuckled, "I've done profited more'n you. It gits kinda lonesome livin' alone, with nothin' but that danged Bugle mule to talk to. It's a sight more sport to watch a gangly kid like you wuz fill out into a man. 'Tain't every gent either, that gits a chance to plaster a handle on a younker, and I did you right proud at that. Bronc Maverick ain't a bad name, and it's expressive as all get out. One of these days, mark my word, that danged black spot in yore brain will git well and you'll remember yore right handle and all about yoreself. Howsomever, it would probably speed things up if we could drop our claws on thet red-bearded cuss you do remember. He could tell us a thing or two. But you mark my word, Bronc, we set here long enough in Mesquite Flat, and he'll come ridin' up to our door. The cream's been skimmed off the gold fields around Sacramento and Placerville, and them danged fool Forty-niners who made a stack and blew it are out huntin' more diggin's now. The town's full-up right now, and everybody headin' into the Panamints is most likely to stop off here to outfit. We're settin' right at the crossroads, Bronc, and we ain't goin' tuh lose. Six years is a long time to wait—"

"It ain't too long!" There was repressed violence in Maverick's reply. Steam rose about his rugged, soot-smudged features as he doused the shoe into a tub of water.

When it was cool, Bronc took it and strode down the runway toward a skittish pinto cayuse tied to a ring-bolt in the plank floor. He saw the animal snort and roll back its eyes as he approached.

"Watch thet critter's heels, Bronc," Panamint warned. "He looks like an ornery one to me."

The lithe young smithy nodded, and stooped to take the cayuse's fetlock. He had no fear of animals, and both dogs and horses sensed it and liked him as a rule. This very fact threw Bronc off guard. Hunkered down in the gloom, his first warning was a wicked squeal from

the mustang. Then a hoof whizzed like a rifle bullet across his shoulder, so close that Bronc felt a filed edge of it scrape against the stubble that covered his jaws. Surprise sent him back on his heels, as Panamint's hoarse shout echoed the angry squeals of the animal.

But only for an instant. By the time the mustang's kicking heels had regained the runway floor, Bronc was springing forward again, into the welter of flying hoofs that would have battered his brains out had a single kick connected. His long arms wrapped like the flanges of a vise about the cayuse's knees. His lean torso straightened like a released bow, mighty muscles crawling across his back as he stood up.

The paint horse went down on its side, the sound of its strike echoing through the dusky shop like the beat of a drum. Breath whooshed from the animal's barrel like steam from a boiler. Bronc flung his wiry length across the animal's withers, big hands twisting the cayuse's head until it was helpless.

It had all happened so rapidly that Panamint had only had time to snatch up his old Sharps buffalo gun that always stood just inside the doorway.

Bronc's breath was coming in short, hard gasps as he turned his head to call to his old pard. "Come back here, Joe, and set on this loco nag's haid till I finish shoein' him. Bring some piggin' strings 'stead of that cannon."

Gradually the flaring light of anger that had made his blue-gray eyes turn chill and hard as stone faded. Bronc Maverick had no use for either man or beast that struck without warning. Against outlaw man, or outlaw beast, his instinctive urge was to fight to the finish.

He saw Panamint stand the rifle by the door sheepishly, and start down the runway. "Danged if you cain't move quicker'n a scared rabbit runnin' away from a lobo," he growled admiringly. "I ain't seen nothin' like it in a coon's age, son. I'd hate to stand in that red-bearded gent's shoes if yuh ever tangle with him! Heck 'n' blazes, I was goin' to plug that critter afore he tramped you and instead you tramped him! I—"

A quavering cry that seemed to spring through the very floors and warped walls of the shop stopped the words in his throat. Bronc heard it, too, and stiffened involuntarily. He felt the short hairs along the back of his neck start to crawl. Never in his life had a sound like this come to him before. Suddenly like a soul crying in torment, that weird sound beat in at them again. Even the cayuse he was still holding seemed to grow still and listen.

Dazedly Bronc sought Panamint's face. It was probably only the cry of some bird or animal he had never heard before, but his partner's expression gave him no reassurance. Panamint Joe stood like a statue, his leathery, wrinkled old face frozen. His knobby fingers that were permanently crooked from sifting too much sand and gravel through them, hung motionless at his sides. Tensely Bronc waited for the cry to repeat itself. When it didn't, Panamint lifted his hand to wipe beads of sweat from his forehead. His faded eyes met Bronc's, a mingling of surprise and fear of the unknown fighting for mastery in them.

"Pard, am I goin' daft, or did you hear it, too?"

"I heard it," Bronc nodded. "But I'll live jest as long and mebbe be a lot happier if I never hear it again! What you figger it was, Joe?"

"Sounded to me like Satan's done

busted outa hell and is headin' this way to take our taws. Me, I'm gettin' my Betsy gun an' goin' on a still hunt for it, whatever it is. Let that cayuse up, son, and come along." Without another glance at his young pard, the old prospector turned and hurried back toward the front of his shop.

Bronc stood up and let the thoroughly cowed paint pony scramble to its feet. His stomach felt like it was about to turn inside out. Cold sweat bathed him suddenly. For a minute or two Bronc had to brace himself against the waves of nausea that flowed over him. He wondered all at once if the cayuse had landed a kick in his middle that he had been too busy to feel. A kick that might have torn some of his vital organs loose. Then the feeling passed, and he was his usual well-controlled self once again.

When he turned toward the doorway, Panamint Joe had already disappeared. Bronc strode after him, not bothering to circle his whipcord waist with the brown gun belts that hung from a peg in the front wall. Twin bone-handled Colts, with etched handles so they wouldn't slip in his palm, nestled in the greased holsters. Bronc wore the guns without show when he wore them at all. No one in Mesquite Flats knew how well he could use those weapons—not even Panamint. The speed with which his supple wrists could drag the balanced weapons and thumb lead from their barrels frightened Bronc a little, it had come to him so instinctively. It made him wonder, sometimes, if the father he couldn't remember had been a gunslammer, a killer, a fugitive who had had to abandon his son on the salt flats of Death Valley.

The thought was an odd one coming right on the tail of that weird cry, but it had shaken Bronc more than he cared to admit.

He raced through the open portals of the shop, a long, arrow-straight figure of young manhood, wondering if any one else had heard that strange, ululating yell. But a glance to the left up the single street of the little town showed him that evidently no one had. Their blacksmith shop was right at the edge of the ridge that divided the valley into north and south basins and it was up from that dread South Sink, where more than one man had met his death, that the call had come, he reasoned. Bronc spun that way and stopped dead in his tracks, his eyes widening at what he saw.

Tearing from between a pair of red boulders, the gateway to the trail down to the shimmering floor of the desert, came a gray burro with a diamond-hitched pack atop the cross-trees of the pack saddle. Belaboring it onward from behind with the barrel of an old Henry rifle was a short, stocky figure almost as wide as he was tall. Burro Bob was the only name men knew him by. Some called him crazy. They said that Death Valley suns had fried his brains like an egg. That only a damned fool would spend his time hunting the origin of the wild jackasses that cavorted about the talus slopes at the edge of the Panamints when he might better be searching for gold.

Bronc had always felt sorry for the old-timer that everyone scorned. Friend of misery himself, his sympathies were always with the underdog. He found himself running toward the stumbling prospector, who was still coming on. Burro Bob was weaving like a drunk, or a man on the verge of collapse. Bronc could see the old-timer's chest heave like

a bellows as he sucked great drafts of hot air into his lungs.

He and the pack burro were almost abreast now, the scrabbling sound of the animal's little hoofs loud in the hush of afternoon. The pack on the animal's back, Bronc noticed, was slipping, but he had no time to pay it attention. His eyes were for the prospector alone. Alkali and salt glistened in the beard that covered Burro Bob's jowls. It lay in powdered flakes on his clothes. The old-timer had come a long way, fast, Bronc realized. He was on the verge of exhaustion, his feet so heavy that he could hardly lift them.

"Whoa up there, fella," he called cheerfully. "You cain't rush around thisaway on a hot day."

Burro Bob seemed not to hear the friendly greeting. Eyes bugged half from his head, he seemed not to see Bronc at all. Only then did he realize the thing that was driving Burro Bob, that had brought him up from the desert at a run that would kill less hardy man. A dread that he couldn't name clutched suddenly at Bronc's heart. Fear had driven Burro Bob out of Death Valley. Fear! Had that mysterious cry they had heard had anything to do with it?—he asked himself.

Bronc's lean hand flashed out to tangle in the loose sleeve of the prospector's shirt as they came abreast. "Bob," he said sharply, "draw up. Take it easy, man, or you'll die in yore tracks!"

With the strength of a maniac, Burro Bob threw off Bronc's hand. The surprise force of the blow sent him tottering back.

"Leave me be," he babbled hoarsely, "leave me be. Got to get to town before they get me. Get to Wells Fargo. I'm marked for death and—"

Bronc heard that much as the force of Burro Bob's push knocked him backward. The old prospector had scuttled on up the trail after his burro which was trotting into the edge of town, by the time Bronc caught his balance.

Spike heels plowed in to stop himself, Bronc bent forward, brain seething at the import of the prospector's words. Then something whispered past his cheek. He felt the stinging wash of air against his skin.

Chuck! The sound came like the strike of a bullet into an adobe wall. His eyes bugged down at the still-quivering arrow, its tip buried in the sand just in front of him! Only his stoop, Bronc Maverick realized, had saved him from the death for which Burro Bob had been marked!

That cry which seemed to come from nowhere, and yet everywhere, filled the atmosphere once more, and this time it sounded like demoniacal laughter to the amazed young smithy.

CHAPTER II.

WARRANT OF DOOM.

BRONC whirled, his lean hands sweeping down to grab at his gunless thighs, then he remembered that his weapons were still at the blacksmith shop. A curse grated between his skinned-back lips, but he stifled it ruefully. A gun wasn't a bit of use if there was nothing to target. And he couldn't see a thing.

Brush and cactus interspersed by sand-eroded boulders covered the slope down to the floor of the South Sink. Eyes narrowed against the sun, Bronc plunged to the rim, studying every inch of the slope for sign of movement. But nothing stirred there. The dun hillside looked as empty as the day it had been created, and as silent.

As though to reassure himself that it had really happened, Bronc

Like a sack of grain, his limp form disappeared with a splash!

glanced back across his shoulder. That arrow was there all right, mute testimony that he hadn't dreamed all this. For a moment longer, Bronc crouched on the rim, but his search went unrewarded, as answerless questions poured through his mind.

Who had Burro Bob referred to as "they"? Why was he marked for death? Death, Bronc reflected grimly as he turned back, that had missed the prospector but almost nailed him. "Whoever is after that old coot ain't very choosey!" he muttered thoughtfully. Again his thoughts veered to that weird cry. It was like something from another world; certainly Bronc didn't see how it could have come from a human throat. And yet there before him was that arrow. Was there some connection between it and that savage cry which had come three times?

Burro Bob was the only man, Bronc decided, who might be able to answer those questions. At the thought he looked toward town, and again his spine stiffened. For a moment it looked to him as though the empty street had filled because some-

one had heard that weird cry, then he realized that his guess was wrong. Men were pouring out of saloons and lodging houses like ants from a hole. The tag-end of a hoarse yell reached his ears.

"Gold! Boys, Burro Bob's struck it rich—"

As if knifed, the young smithy stiffened, then he was reaching down to snatch the long arrow from the sand at his feet. Lengthening his stride, Bronc followed after the old prospector who had already reached a point opposite their blacksmith shop. He saw Burro Bob trip and fall, rise and stagger on again after his pack jenny, which had stopped halfway up the street, its pack hanging at a crazy angle, half on and half off the saddle.

Anger whipped Bronc on as he saw a miner stoop and pick something from the ground that had fallen out of a torn corner of the pack. A ray from the red sun sinking in the west caught at the object and set it to glittering. It was a nugget the size of a small clod! Then his view was cut off as more men surged into the street. He knew what would happen now, and the knowledge chilled his blood. The pickings had been slim for the riffraff who had recently drifted to town. Like rats leaving a sinking ship, the gamblers and harpies and confidence men had deserted the dying gold camps along the Sacramento. Some of them had landed here in Mesquite Flat, waiting around like vultures to grab the winnings of any prospector with guts enough to brave Death Valley and come out with a poke of gold. Bronc's brain reeled at the thought of how much that pack would be worth, if it was full of the yellow metal.

Burro Bob himself had at last reached the outskirts of the crowd that had gathered. Bronc saw him feebly trying to elbow a way through the circle about his pack animal. Some fellow there hit him a back-handed blow across the face, knocking him backward. Burro Bob sprawled down and dropped his rifle in the dust. Weakly he tried to regain it as he stubbornly pushed up to his feet once again.

Bronc was opposite their blacksmith shop now, and his guns were just inside the door, but there wasn't time to stop for them. By the time he could buckle the belts about his waist, Burro Bob's pack of gold would have melted like a cake of ice in the sun. Conscious suddenly that he still clutched the mysterious arrow in his hand, Bronc tossed it through the open door of the shop and ran on.

Exertion had already started perspiration streaming from his pores, but he did not slow his racing pace. Hatred of the carrion crew that would rob a helpless prospector, already beset by nameless terrors, jerked him onward.

He felt a stab of pity for Burro Bob when he saw the dull-eyed helplessness of the old-timer, who was trying to reach the side of his donkey.

"Let me through," Bronc heard him babbling. "Let me through, duh yuh hear? Thet gold ain't mine—"

If it wasn't his, then who did it belong to? The fleeting thought crossed Bronc's mind as he reached the edge of the crowd. Prospectors in for supplies, gamblers in their frock coats, and a rough gun-hung bunch composed it. Tall enough to see over their heads, Bronc saw a trio of gents in Levis hunkered down beside the pack which they had managed to yank from the jenny's saddle. They were trying to paw open the heavily roped, tarpaulin-wrapped

bundle. A fourth member of the bunch stood on spraddle legs, a brace of Colts trained on the crowd.

Bronc knew the gent as Highgrade Haley, and he had heard it whispered about that Haley and his gang of toughs had been chased out of every camp on the Mother Lode. A brawny six-footer, he stood like a pillar of evil, thumbs hooked over the pronged hammers of his guns, a grin that was more like a snarl on his heavy-jowled, clean-shaven face. Sooty eyes that were an odd contrast to his sandy hair glittering hotly out at the circle.

"Don't git too curious, gents," he was drawling complacently. "My boys is jest pertectin' Burro Bob's poke so it'll all be here when he calms down. There's some of yuh I know that he couldn't trust to do as much!" Hoarse laughter shook him as though this were a good joke.

Those things Bronc saw in the brief moment it took him to reach out and grab the shoulders of a pair of the cowed prospectors who were standing by helplessly watching this red-handed steal. He saw, too, that that was why they'd refused to let Burro Bob through. Haley was probably only waiting for an excuse to gun down the old prospector and claim legal right to the gold-laden pack.

But there was going to be a different end to the story if he had his way about it! Bronc swept the pair of dumfounded prospectors aside. He sprang through the ring with all the silent ferocity of a cougar leaping to the kill. The very speed of his attack carried him within reach of Highgrade Haley before that complacent thief could prong back the hammers of his guns and let them fall.

Bronc's doubled fists, carrying all the power of his hundred and eighty pounds of solid bone and muscle behind the blows, beat a sharp tattoo against Haley's middle and chest. The force of his rush carried him against Haley. He felt his shoulders smash the man's hard breastbone. Haley's breath whistled out through slack lips. He tried to bring one of his guns against the young smith's ribs, but Bronc saw the move in time to clamp the other's wrist with steely fingers.

Knocked backward by his rush, Haley tripped over one of his own men, who was trying frantically to get the pack open. The tough beneath them let out a squawk of terror as their bodies smashed down on top of him. Through the dust kicked up by their jolting fall, Bronc saw Haley's black guns spin out of his hands. But the big outcast wasn't whipped yet. His left landed with a jolting impact against Maverick's ear. Stars danced before Bronc's eyes. Haley was no mean opponent when it came to rough-and-tumble fighting. From what seemed a great distance the young smithy heard the roar of the crowd urging him on. Disgust roiled through him. They'd yell for another man who'd fight to see a fellow get his due, but none of them would have lifted a finger to prevent Haley from getting away with the gold in that pack.

Like two embattled grizzlies, they rolled in the dust. Haley's thick thumbs, gritty with sand scraped across the arched bridge of Bronc's nose. The outcast was trying to gouge his eyes! Jabbing pain went through his brain. But the gent's dirty tactics served to fire reserves of strength yet unplumbed in Bronc Maverick's body. Like a berserk bull he butted his red head into Haley's middle, and scrambled back. Together they came erect, Bronc's

supple speed giving him a shade of an advantage. Lights danced before his eyes so that he could hardly see Haley's contorted visage. But he knew that he had to whip the gent now or never.

His blocky right curved in a swinging uppercut. The blow landed with a pulpy sound, true to the mark of Haley's craggy chin. Pain shot the length of Maverick's arm, as through his clearing vision he saw Haley straighten. The man's eyes rolled back until only the white showed. He took a couple of tottering steps forward, hands vainly pawing at the air.

Bronc caught him by shirt front and crotch as his knees caved, swung him from the ground. Blood and sweat marked the hard lines of his visage, but it was the blazing light in his gray orbs that parted the circle hastily in front of him. Bronc swung his victim like a pendulum then let go. Haley's body arched through space. Like a sack of grain his limp form disappeared with a splash in a big horse trough beside the hitch rail at the curb.

Weariness that was like a coating of lead sagged Bronc's muscles; but, like a bulldog that never quits, he whirled back ready to take on the rest of Haley's crew.

Then a sigh of relief slipped from his lips as he saw that it wouldn't be necessary. He had wondered what had happened to his lantern-jawed old partner who had slipped out to trace that mysterious call, and, though he had no way of knowing Panamint's success, the old man was at least safe now. For he was holding Haley's bunch under the muzzle of his scarred old Sharps buffalo gun. A wolfish grin twisted his mustached lips as his eye caught Bronc's.

"Nice goin', fella," he drawled. "You want I should turn one of these gents loose to drag Haley outa thet trough afore he drowns, or should we let the cuss take a good long bath? Probably the fust one he's had in years!"

Bronc grinned through battered lips. "Turn 'em all loose," he responded. "I don't want Haley's death on my hands." Then his lips flattened and thinned as the three thoroughly cowed gun-slingers broke for the trough and their chief who was floundering around inside it.

"You gents heard what I said," Bronc cracked, "an' it goes. I got no wish to kill any man, but I ain't like some of the rest of you who'll stand by and watch a gent git robbed that's too old to help hisself. I'm tellin' the whole kit and kabooble of you right now that me an' Panamint are goin' to see that Burro Bob gets where he's aimin' to go. I'm willin' to back that with guns or fists—if any of you jaspers feel like arguin'."

Some flushed at the scorn in the young smithy's words, others dropped their eyes, because they knew he had spoken the truth. And yet there wasn't a one in the bunch, Bronc realized grimly, who would call him friend again. The truth had hurt them all, and not one of them would thank him for it.

Only Burro Bob, he saw, seemed to pay no attention to his words. Mumbling like a man talking in his sleep, the squat old prospector had rushed in at the first opportunity. He was struggling manfully to lift the heavy pack back to the patient jenny's forked saddle. But it was too much for his drained strength. Afraid even now to let any of these others realize the value of the load, Bronc stepped forward quickly. Muscles crawled like knotted serpents along his corded forearm as he lent his strength. And

it took every ounce of it to get that pack in place!

He tried to compute in his mind the value of such a pack, and it set his brain to ringing. But it wasn't his anyway, he told himself grimly, and Burro Bob had said that it didn't belong to him either. There'd be time enough, though, he reflected, to straighten out some of the tangle after they'd seen the old prospector to his destination.

The same thought seemed to be in Panamint Joe's mind, and he seemed to know better than Bronc how to deal with the muttering prospector. Still keeping an eye on Haley's bunch, who were helping their chief out of the horse trough, he stepped to Burro Bob's side and looked down at the squat desert rat.

"Shet up thet talkin' to yoreself, yuh old fossil," he growled, "or damned if we won't know fer shore that you've been chewin' on loco weed. Whichaway does the stick float, Bob? Where do yuh wanta park yore boots?"

Like a man coming out of a trance, Bronc saw Burro Bob lift his graying head. He blinked his shoe-button eyes at the lanky old desert rat at his side. As he watched, Bronc saw relief for the first time replace the graven fear that had been on the old-timer's face.

"I beat 'em, Joe," he said in husky tones. "Beat 'em out with the gold. Fella, I'm headin' for Wells Fargo up the street. I've heerd tell they got a safe where they keep a man's valuables for him. Come along with me if yuh want, and after I git rid of this here pack, yuh can buy me a snort of busthaid."

A flush mounted to the edge of Panamint Joe's white hair. His faded eyes started to sparkle angrily. "Why, yuh old tightwad," he roared. "Yuh tell me that with a poke-full of *dinero* you'd let me set up the drinks?"

An interested spectator, Bronc watched Burro Bob pass a hand across his face as though to erase some horrible memory. Only he and Panamint Joe were close enough to hear the old prospector's reply.

"The gold ain't mine, and I hope to God the gent it's meant fer never claims it. There's nothin' but death yuh cain't see waitin' in the valley for him as does. And I'm carryin' the warrant that'll doom him in here," his finger punched the pack, "an' here," he prodded the greasy front of the old buckskin shirt that was stuffed inside his Levis. Then, swiftly, his head swung from side to side. Bronc saw that hunted look spring suddenly to his beady eyes, saw his skin pale. A shudder shook his squat frame. "Let's get under cover," he gulped. "A man ain't safe anywhere!"

CHAPTER III.

LOST GOLD TRAIN.

A CURIOUS crowd followed them down the dusty street toward the warped false front that housed the Wells-Fargo stage station. Only a few scales of paint clung forlornly to the walls and window frames. Hot gusts of wind that carried scouring sand had long ago scraped all the paint from Mesquite Flat's false fronts. Only a couple of dozen structures lined the main street anyway. A few outlying shacks nestling in dry gulches completed the desert town. Saloons, a couple of general stores, a single hotel, and Panamint Joe's blacksmith shop transacted all the business of those who came to this shabby town, and yet it was at the crossroads of empire. Emigrants journeying west over the Old Spanish Trail from the Great Salt Lake

in Utah passed through on their way to California's golden, northern valleys. Prospectors and travelers cutting across country from southern California into Nevada passed through here on the regular stage line. Others, more and more of them all the time, were journeying this way, called by the lure of gold that might be hidden in the fantastic ranges that inclosed the long trough of Death Valley like jealous arms.

Trying desperately to bring himself back to an even keel after all the sudden things that had happened within the last hour, Bronc Maverick let his eyes roam over this wild country. Blue shadows were already pooling in the folded flanks of the stark Panamints that walled the valley on the west. Northward the Last Chance range curved out like a barrier for the sand dunes to break against. Eastward and southward, the Funnels, the Grapevines, the Avawatz, and a tangle of other ranges Bronc couldn't even name, barred entrance or egress to all but the strong.

A survey of the wild, stark beauty of those mountains had served before to bring peace to his mind, troubled as it was by the hopelessness of his quest to recall the lost chapters of his past. But it had the opposite effect now. For what seemed the first time to him, Bronc felt that he was really seeing Death Valley. It was a harsh, dangerous land, asking no quarter and giving none. Men had tried to explore it and died for their pains. Yet it was that quality of the unknown that forever brought more of them here to pit their skill against the iron peaks, he reflected. Who knew what was hidden behind them?

The thought lifted the short hairs along the back of Bronc's neck. Across his mind flashed once again the bug-eyed fear that had driven Burro Bob out of the desert. That fear was still in the old prospector even though he was obviously safe here in town. He reminded Bronc of a hunted animal. As they stepped to the porch of the Wells Fargo office, the desert rat's eyes seemed to be searching everywhere at once. His step was still little more than a stagger as he moved across the portal into the shadowed station.

Bronc had lifted the heavy pack from the donkey's saddle before climbing the steps. Panamint Joe brought up the rear, his heavy rifle hooked in the crook of his elbow.

The station agent, Sage Winslow, came from a rear room. A small, dapper man in gray broadcloth, his narrow face had the chill quality of a steel trap. Honest to the core, a square-shooter, he was liked and admired by everyone who met him. Bronc Maverick knew that he was accepted by Mesquite Flat as its unofficial mayor.

Winslow came to the pine counter that inclosed a portion of the waiting room, and laid his hands on it. But before he could speak, Burro Bob said to Bronc, "Drap the pack right here, son." He indicated the counter.

Bronc put the heavy bundle down near the agent, and stepped back beside Panamint. His shoulder ached from the weight of the pack. Excited talk buzzed about the shadowy room, for the crowd that had been in the street had pushed in behind them avidly waiting to hear the story they all felt Burro Bob would tell.

Once again Sage Winslow opened his lips to speak, but another interruption occurred. Boots scraped on the porch. Bronc whirled to see Highgrade Haley and his trio of beard-stubbled gunnies trail in behind him. Haley, he saw with sur-

prise, had evidently stepped over to the Desert Hotel and changed his wet clothes. He was clothed now in the suave black of a gambler. Tall, bronzed, there was a certain arrogant handsomeness to his bony features. But for a swelling lump along one jaw, he showed no marks of their recent encounter. The man's sooty black eyes swept over the tense figure of Bronc, then went on to touch the pack.

"Shore glad to see yuh got the gold here safe," he said to the room in general. "Danged shame, Maverick, that you and I had to tangle over it," he finished smoothly.

The outcast's words drew Bronc's sandy brows together. Highgrade Haley was no fool! His smooth tongue had all but shifted the blame for that trouble in the street onto his shoulders. Some of Mesquite Flat's supposedly upright citizens were already smiling at Haley, and turning scowls on Bronc.

Disgust that he couldn't conceal curled Bronc's lips. "Let it lay that way, Haley. I'm satisfied if you are."

"And I'm not satisfied with any of this business," Sage Winslow cut in sharply. "Jest what in tarnation is this talk about gold? Bob, explain yoreself."

A chuckle slipped from the squat prospector's barrel chest as the room quieted, every ear straining to hear what he would have to say. Burro Bob slapped the pack. "They's nothin' but nuggets and dust in hyar, Mr. Winslow," he said huskily, "an' I'm askin' yuh to put it in yore strong box. There ain't but one gent got a right to claim it, an' if he don't show up, you're to keep it till it grows warts!"

Bronc saw an expression of amazement pass across the station agent's face, but he controlled it. "Who am I to hold this for?" he asked formally.

A crooked grin twisted Burro Bob's lips. "For a kid named Pike Frazer!"

Every man in that room but Bronc Maverick had heard that name before. A saga of the West was the story of Long Tom Frazer's Lost Gold Train. But it was all new to Bronc. Bewildered, he listened to the concerted gasp of the men gathered here. It was like the sighing of a breeze through an open window. Puzzled, he turned his eyes on Burro Bob.

The squat desert rat was thoroughly enjoying his moment of important. Bronc's gaze switched to the station agent. Sage Winslow was gasping like the others. At last he got out, "God, man, who gave those orders?"

Burro Bob's chuckle whispered through the hush. "His dad—Long Tom Frazer! I've located the Lost Gold Train!"

A roar that swelled into an avalanche of sound shook the walls. Bronc found himself shouting with the others, but he didn't know why. Bitterness rushed over him suddenly. The Lost Gold Train. A chapter from his forgotten past. It brought back with a rush all the things he had missed in life. Different than any of these men, a man alone, he stood there and listened to the crowd go mad.

Suddenly he felt Panamint's gnarled fingers bite into his arm. "Listen to this, kid," his partner whispered. "Listen!"

Evidently he was about to hear a story of some importance, if the excitement of the crowd meant anything. Why, Bronc wondered, hadn't Panamint Joe told him this yarn before? The old-timer had been like

a father to him these last half dozen years. On long nights around a campfire or around the table in their shack, he had brought back pictures out of the past to tell him. "I'll bring yuh up to date, son, as best I can," he had often said. "Mebbe I can kinda take the place of what's gone, kid." But to his knowledge, Bronc had never heard Panamint mention any Lost Gold Train.

Eagerly he strained his ears to catch disjointed sentences, and bits of information about the lost caravan and the man Burro Bob had called Long Tom Frazer. Every old prospector in the room seemed to be talking at once, trying to outdo his neighbor in remembering those halcyon days of '49. And from the babble of conversation Bronc pieced together the background story of Long Tom Frazer, and his Gold Train.

Vividly the pictures out of that past came to him. Long Tom Frazer —the name had a ring to it. A giant redhead he had been, a man who could wash more gold in a rocker than most men could in a sluicebox, an old-timer in the room insisted. That was how he had gained his name in the Mother Lode country. A fighter, and leader of men, he had wrested a fortune from Murderer's Bar, and had had sense enough to want to keep it.

Swiftly the story unfolded before Bronc. Other citizens of Murderer's Bar had learned of Frazer's plan to take his gold East for deposit. Many of them had begged him to take their stakes along with it. Like a snowball rolling downhill, his plan had caught fire. And by the time he was ready to leave the Sacramento, the wagon beds of twenty stout Conestogas were lined with chests and bullhide bags of bullion.

That amount seemed incredible to Bronc. He heard someone mention a million dollars, another two million. Frazer had been named captain of the Gold Train that set out under his leadership down the San Joaquin Valley. Some of the owners who had tired of gold-town life accompanied the caravan, one oldster remembered.

His voice cut above the babble. "Hattie Nelson, who made her stake servin' sowbelly an' beans in Placerville, went along, too. She an' her daughter, Dorita, a kid of fifteen, wuz the only women in the party. I've heerd tell Hattie had her cap set fore Long Tom, and had it all figgered that her daughter might hook up with Frazer's kid, Pike. Danged if I don't recollect the boy well, a-settin' on the box of the lead wagon aside his dad, proud as Punch. A spittin' image of the old man, too. About seventeen the kid was then, a strappin' redhead, his hair flowin' free to his shoulders—"

Wistfulness filled Bronc. Some of these men had seen that twenty wagon gold train pull out. What a sight it must have been! Lost in the story it took him a moment to adjust his senses as Sage Winslow held up his hand for silence.

"As I have been appointed custodian of this pack of gold," he said in his dry, precise tones, "I should like to have the pleasure of finishing this story to refresh my memory of all the points involved. I might preface my remarks by saying that in lieu of what public opinion has been these years, Burro Bob's orders to me sound slightly fantastic. As I remember, Long Tom Frazer brought his caravan down the San Joaquin and into Death Valley here, claiming to know a short cut route across the South Sink that would land them at Great Salt Lake weeks ahead of any other trail they might follow. It is known that the cara-

van reached the South Sink, and that it *did not* show up at Salt Lake.

"I recall that by the time six months went by, ugly rumors were flying thick and fast. And the most persistent was that Long Tom Frazer had engineered the whole trek to put over one of the greatest steals in history. Feeling ran so high that, if he had showed up after that, he would have been lynched on sight! There was, I remember, quite some proof that he deserved lynching! For later parties traveling across this infernal Sink discovered all that was left of the Gold Train."

Ears straining to miss no word, Bronc listened to the tragic story.

"They found," Sage Winslow went on, "charred bits of wagons and plenty of skeletons. One of the skeletons was that of a woman! A skull count numbered twenty-five dead. What happened to the rest of the people? *Forty started the trek!* Twenty wagons pulled out of Sacramento. *Only ten had been burned!* Gentlemen, that is the mystery that has never been solved. What happened to the other fifteen men, the ten wagons and all the gold?" He paused for a moment to let his question sink in to the minds of his listeners. Then he continued.

"The general opinion at the time was that Frazer and the guards he took with him murdered the balance of the people and stole the fantastic golden horde. However, it has never been proved, for no one has ever seen or heard from Long Tom Frazer, or a member of his hand. And no one has ever seen the gold. And now along comes Burro Bob claiming he has discovered the Lost Gold Train. Gentlemen, I don't blame you for becoming excited. You are seeing history in the making. A lost chapter of the past being opened—Burro Bob, how did you discover the Lost Gold Train? Where is it? Where is Frank Frazer? Why, if he is alive, didn't you bring him out with you? How, for that matter, do we know that his son, Pike Frazer, is alive, and will claim this gold?"

Excitement had broken through the calm of Sage Winslow's tones. Tense as any man in that room now, Bronc watched him lean forward to stare at the old desert rat.

Burro Bob teetered at the counter, clutched at his beard. His watery eyes swept about the half moon of faces watching him. "You're a pack of wolves, all of you," he snarled at them. "And I know what's in the minds of everyone. Either yuh believe what I say and are figgerin' out a way to try and find that gold yoreselves—or yuh think I'm crazy. Well, mebbe I am, but the gold's here to prove I ain't lyin'. Yuh can take what I got to say or leave it, suit yoreselves. But I'm warnin' every man jack of yuh. Don't try an' backtrack my trail across the desert. There's death lurkin' on every foot of it!"

Like an obbligato to his words, Bronc remembered that cry which had seemed to come from nowhere. He recalled that long arrow fired by no visible hand. "I believe you," he said simply, but Burro Bob did not seem to hear him.

CHAPTER IV.

NUGGET RING.

HE had fumbled a little packet of gray burro skin from the front of his greasy blouse. As though it was a mirror to recall things that he had seen, the old prospector stared at it. He seemed to have forgotten that there were others eagerly listening to him. He spoke softly like a man talking to himself.

"Ain't nobody but me ever give

a cuss where the burros come from that are runnin' wild out on the salt flats. But I keered, and I found out. Long Tom Frazer an' the gold's in the place they come from, and likely to stay there till he rots! A pack of red devils, livin' in rock houses, are watchin' him all the time. They're Piutes, the same red sons of Satan that swooped down outa their forgotten canyon on a bloody night and finished what a pack of white renegades, who Frank Frazer had trusted as guards for his gold, and the others had started. But the renegades got their needin's, most of 'em, sez Long Tom. The Piutes took 'em along with Frank and the gold into the mountains. They loaded half the wagons and made 'em drive their teams to Forgotten Canyon. The gold's there runnin' out of busted bags and chests, but there ain't a white man left but old Long Tom now. They call him the Sun Man 'cause he's got red hair. But he figgers that he'd almost as leave be dead as eat another burro steak! Them Piutes raise burros fer their meat supply. Thet ain't all they do—but it's all yo're goin' to hear about. I'll do the rest of my talkin' to Pike Frazer!"

"What's that chunk of stuff yuh got in yore hand, Bob?" someone called from the crowd.

The question seemed to sting the old desert rat to life. He blinked as though coming back from a long distance, and hastily shoved the square of burro skin back inside his tunic. "Thet's for Pike Frazer, too," he yelled back defiantly, "an' nobody gits a peek at it but him!"

There was a stir back in the crowd. Bronc saw Highgrade Haley push himself from the circle and stride forward. He stopped near the counter. "An' right here, feller citizens, is where I'm goin' to shine," he announced loudly. "I happen to know Long Tom Frazer's whelp—the kid did escape that bloody massacre along with a coupla others, but he's been afeared to mention his name 'cause of them ornery stories thet have kept circulatin' ever since the train was lost. The kid's allus hid his identity, figurin' he'd git lynched if it come out. Howsomever, I guess now thet we all know what's really happened, he won't be in no danger. Who knows, he may lead us all to the gold—it's any man's *dinero* now!"

Standing beside his partner, Bronc saw what might have been a shudder shake Panamint Joe's stooped shoulders. A big man in his day, heat had dried the flesh on Panamint's heavy bones. But, emaciated though he might be, Bronc knew his partner was all leather and steel. What had caused that shiver to pass over him?

Then Panamint Joe's creaky tones broke the surprised hush that had followed Highgrade Haley's pronouncement. "Funny thing," he drawled icily, "thet it's took you so long tuh remember thet Pike Frazer's alive. Course thet gold on the counter wouldn't have nothin' to do with it."

A hot flush mantled Haley's cheeks. His sooty black eyes narrowed to venomous slits as his hands dropped beside holstered Colts, the shape of which Bronc could see beneath the gambler's long black coat.

"Yuh mean you're doubting my word, mister?" Haley purred.

Casually Panamint Joe tipped up the muzzle of his old Sharps. His faded eyes were sparkling dangerously as he made his answer. "Seems as how Long Tom Frazer figgers his boy's alive, all right," he agreed, "but danged if I can see why the younker'd keep shet fer thirty seconds once he got out of the desert.

If he was in on thet there massacre Burro Bob told us about, it ain't reasonable to suppose he'd keep still. Seems to me he'd 'a' rounded up a bunch to go and make them Injuns pay if it was the last thing he ever done—unless they was somethin' the matter with him so thet he couldn't. Nope, Haley, yuh got to show me thet you can produce Pike Frazer, jest like a magician pullin' rabbits out of a hat!"

"And me, Mr. Haley!" Sage Winslow said, leaning across the counter in front of him. "I want it understood by all of you that the disposal of this gold is a sacred trust that has been placed in my hands, and I shall handle the matter as seems most fitting. Namely, before *anybody* gains possession of this pack, identification must be proved to me and Judge Jim Peek, who's the lawful referee!"

Bronc heard a thin chuckle slip from the lips of Burro Bob. "'Twon't be hard to know him when yuh see him, Winslow. Accordin' to what Long Tom told me, he stuck his own lucky gold nugget ring on the kid's finger afore he sent him kitin' through the battle lines. The kid oughta still be wearin' thet ring—I can identify it if I see it!"

From where he was standing, Bronc could see the expression that crossed the faces of both Panamint Joe and the outcast, Highgrade Haley. And what he read on their visages left him mystified, for at the close of Burro Bob's speech, Haley's full lips had drooped foolishly. He looked like a man with fortune in his grasp, who sees it suddenly snatched from his fingers. Panamint, on the other hand, had reminded the young smithy of a bayed lobo, fighting against the hopeless odds of Haley's word that he knew the son of Long Tom Frank Frazer. Now a triumphant light came into Panamint Joe's eyes.

Bronc wondered, all at once, why his partner, Panamint, should be so interested in this affair. Certainly it was none of their business who gained possession of this gold.

His revery was broken as Panamint Joe lowered the muzzle of his rifle and stepped back. His partner's lips brushed close by his ear, the words he spoke barely making sense above the bedlam of talk that had broken out again.

"Slip back outa here with me, fella," he heard Panamint whisper. "We got some bizness thet needs attendin' to in a hurry."

Bronc nodded, but as he turned to go the memory of Haley's smug words, "it's any man's *dinero* now," rang through his mind. He had just finished telling himself that this was none of their affair, and yet oddly enough he found himself offering a hot rebuttal to the outcast's statement. He faced the big hombre.

"Haley, yuh talk of Long Tom Frazer's gold belongin' to the gent who finds it now, an' mebbe you've give some of the folks here a wrong idee. 'Pears to me that gold belongs to the man and women who intrusted it to him now, jest as much as it did then. Most of them folks is probably still alive—an' the ones who died in the massacre shore enough have relatives. That gold is theirs, whether yuh like to admit it or not!"

"Maverick, this is the second time today you've butted into my affairs," Haley said, "but I see yuh ain't heeled, so I cain't ask yuh to draw. You knocked me out with a lucky punch awhile ago, or I'd 'a' tagged you good. Howsomever, thet's behind us. Now I'm goin' to tell you for the last time, keep yore

nose outa my business, or get set fer trouble. Yuh got a lot of guts to be talkin'," he went on scornfully. "A dummy who's got to use a borrowed name! Git back to shoein' hosses. It's all yo're good fer!"

Someone laughed callously in the background. It was that laugh more than Haley's jeering denunciation that bowed the young smithy's shoulders. People here in Mesquite Flat knew his history, what there was of it, and most of them had been sympathetic on the surface. But that laugh seemed to tell him that nobody gave a damn whether he ever filled in the lost pages of his past, and once again found his heritage.

"You win for now, mister," Bronc said thinly. "Mebbe next time I'll take the pot!"

Without looking either to right or left, he strode solidly toward the door. Silent as a long shadow, Panamint joined him. As they stepped outside, Bronc heard Haley say heartily, "Well, Winslow, I'll be seein' yuh soon with Pike Frazer in tow. They ain't a doubt in my mind but what the kid'll measure up to snuff." The man's voice faded behind them as Bronc and Panamint stepped down to the board sidewalk.

Behind them in the stage station Haley and his three henchmen were preparing to leave. The gambler's movements were casual enough until he and his three men hit the street. But once there, his big fingers reached out to bite into the biceps of Bull Madden's arm.

Thick-necked, beetle-browed, Madden looked at his chief out of expressionless eyes. "Yuh put on a good show in there, Highgrade," he said in his thick, slurring tones. "But what's yore game? Yuh don't know any Pike Frazer."

In the dusk Haley's teeth gleamed like a white scar across his visage. "Yo're wrong, Bull!" His voice came in a savage whisper. "I'm thinkin' I'm the only man in the world who knows Pike Frazer, but mebbe I'm mistaken. Thet old coot, Panamint Joe, ain't as dumb as he looks."

Bull Madden's slack lips dropped open foolishly. "Yuh mean thet kid without a name is Pike Frazer?" he demanded incredulously.

Haley nodded. "Yuh've guessed it, Bull," he purred softly. "And yore job is to follow them two, *pronto!* Don't let 'em outa yore sight. If the old coot knows who the kid is, he'll spill it to the boy tonight."

"And if he knows, an' talks?"

"Yuh've shot men in the back before, Bull! Don't mess it up this time. Redheaded Lon Sykes over Shasta way can play Pike Frazer with a leetle coachin'. Ring or no ring, when I git done with him, he'll convince Winslow and Jedge Peek thet he's Long Tom Frazer's son. Just don't slip up on yore chore. There's a million bucks in this pot for us, and we can't lose if yuh nail Maverick and his old pard!"

Bull Madden's brutish face crinkled in an unwholesome grin. "For my cut of a million, chief, I'd gutshoot my own grandmother!" He drew his gun, inspected the cylinder and slammed it back in the holster all in one deft movement. "Two fellers have chalked up their marks, an' I'm one o' the best rubber-outers in these parts. Jest watch my gun smoke from here on out," he added, and Haley rubbed his hands together greedily.

What did Panamint mean when he said, "Kid, you ain't going to have to take that stuff long"? And what lies in store for Bronc Maverick at the hands of the vicious Haley and the killer, Bull Madden? Read the exciting, flash-fast answers in next week's issue.

TRAIL OF THE MONTANA KID

It was a crimson rain from hell, and the Montana Kid's umbrella was a sheet of six-gun lead!

By Sam H. Nickels

HUNCHED slightly forward in his saddle, his right hand within easy reach of one of the black-butted guns that sagged his crisscrossed cartridge betls, Rusty Bolivar reined his horse to a slower gait and looked at the cluster of old buildings that loomed in the darkness in front of him. Suddenly he pulled to a halt.

As he rose up on his toes in his stirrups, the pale starlight glinted dully on the badge of the Texas Rangers that was pinned to the front of his faded shirt. He started to reach for a match to light the stub of cigarette between his lips. But he stopped, and a scowl twisted his freckled face as he realized that the flare of a match might bring a hail of bullets whizzing toward him.

"Huh!" he grumbled, hurling his cigarette aside. "I wonder if Hun-

gry has looked here fer that missin' rural captain."

Rusty's long-legged pard, Hungry Hawkins, had been gone for over a week, and Rusty hadn't been able to locate him.

He looked again toward the deserted town. Once a roaring gold camp, its empty buildings had long ago been turned over to the bats and owls. Occasionally a wanted outlaw used the place as a hide-out.

As the Ranger stared into the silent darkness, he thought of the missing rural captain. The Mexican had come across the Rio Grande to help capture an outlaw who had committed murder after murder on both sides of the river.

The killer had appeared along the border only a few months before. His real name was unknown, but he called himself the Montana Kid. The Kid was a professional gambler who fleeced his victims by any form of trickery, and used his guns with uncanny speed and deadliness when his crookedness was discovered. Hungry Hawkins had been told to watch for the Kid while he was trying to locate the missing rural.

"Doggone it," Rusty muttered disgustedly, gigging his horse forward, "first thet Mex comes huntin' the Montana Kid. Then Hungry has to go hunt fer the Mex an' the Kid. Now I have to come huntin' for all three of 'em. I got a notion to quit this fool Rangerin' an' go back to punchin' cows."

He reached the edge of the ghost town and, still grumbling, guided his horse to the single rubbish-filled street. Dropping his right hand to a gun butt, he rode slowly forward.

Rows of silent, weather-beaten buildings of all kinds lined the street on both sides. Weeds grew through cracks in the sun-warped plank sidewalks, and huge ridges of wind-blown sand were heaped against the sides of some of the houses. An owl was hooting dismally from somewhere in the darkness.

Rusty pulled to a halt in front of what had once been a big saloon and gambling den. He stared at the broken windows and sagging doors, then slipped from his saddle and dropped his bridle reins.

"I reckon if anybody's been prowlin' around here recent, I ought to find tracks somewhere," he muttered softly. "This ought to be as good a place as any to start lookin'."

Leaving his horse ground-hitched, the Ranger bent over and began searching back and forth across the street. He moved slowly, working as best he could in the feeble starlight.

Rusty reached the opposite sidewalk without finding a track of any kind. Suddenly his horse snorted and he spun around with both hands streaking to his guns. He caught a glimpse of the animal's upflung head and dropped to one knee with both Colts sliding from their holsters.

"That horse has spotted somethin'," he muttered. "It's most likely a varmint, but I got a hunch it's a two-legged one."

He stared down the street in the direction the horse was looking. His first thought was of the Montana Kid, but he knew that other outlaws used the old ghost town as a hiding place from time to time. He also thought of Hungry, and of the missing rural officers.

Frowning in the darkness, Rusty got to his feet. His horse had lowered its head and was now nipping hungrily at some weeds. Backing warily across the sidewalk, Rusty crept forward, heading down the street.

Keeping close to the building line, he moved cautiously along until he

reached a long, adobe building that stood slightly back from the street. After a quick glance behind him, he slipped around to one of the sashless windows.

"The horse was lookin' straight at this place when it let out thet snort," he told himself. I'll take a squint inside."

Rusty peered warily through the window. He listened for a moment, then crept on to a side door and carefully pushed it open.

As he stepped into the low-ceilinged room, he could see the dim outlines of an old bar in the thick gloom near the opposite wall. Dust and rubbish covered the floor all around him, and he almost stumbled over a pack rats' nest as he moved sidewise from the door.

Rusty was starting on toward the bar when he thought he heard a faint scraping sound from the darkness beyond an old pool table a short distance away. He ducked backward and something hummed wickedly past his face and chugged into the wall behind him. A knife!

At that instant, Rusty saw a faint movement at the end of the pool table, and both his Colts roared thunderously. As he thumbed his guns to shoot again, another knife ripped through the top of his hat and hurled it from his head.

The Ranger sprang forward in an effort to close with the unseen knifer. But before he could locate the fellow or fire another shot, a thrown chair struck his short bowlegs and spun him half around. Both guns dropped from his hands. He staggered and grabbed at the pool table to keep from falling, and then a dim figure leaped at him out of the darkness and hurled him backward to the floor.

Struggling with his powerful, wiry strength to break the hombre's hold, Rusty wrenched his right arm free and drove a smashing uppercut to the fellow's jaw. They rolled beneath the pool table, and he tried to get a grip on the man's throat.

They battled furiously on the littered floor. Rusty made a grab at the fellow's hips in hopes of getting his hands on a holstered gun, but found that the hombre had none.

He got in another smashing blow to the hombre's jaw that broke his hold and knocked him back. Both staggered to their feet then, only to go down again in a tangle of threshing arms and legs.

Heaving, twisting, slugging, the two men rolled over and over across the dusty floor. They struck against the bar rail with Rusty beneath his heavier antagonist, and then there was a muffled thump, and the hombre went limp. Rusty started to roll him aside when something cracked against the side of his own head, and he fell back to the floor with lights seeming to dance crazily before his eyes.

II.

When Rusty began to come to himself, he rolled over and tried to sit up. He heaved himself to one elbow and heard a muffled hum of voices near him.

"Lay down, Ranger," a voice snarled behind him. "You ain't goin' no place. Try gittin' up, an' I'll rip a bullet through yuh!"

Rusty twisted around. He stared at a stump of candle that was burning in the neck of a whiskey bottle on the end of the bar. His eyes then swung to the blurred figure of a man.

"I reckon yuh figgered yuh'd slip up on us," the hombre growled, striding toward him. "Until you an'

the Mex tangled, I thought there was two of yuh trailin' us. But yore badge an' the fight tells me the Mexican is on the dodge the same as us."

His head now clear, Rusty sat up. As he got a better look at the speaker's wiry figure and pock-marked face, he realized that he had found the Montana Kid.

Close behind the Kid were four heavily armed ruffians. The Kid's eyes glinted wickedly, and his thin lips twisted in a grin as he looked down.

"I reckon we might as well take them piggin' strings offn the Mex, hadn't we boss?" one of the hombres chuckled, jerking a thumb toward the end of the bar. "He was tryin' to bump off this Ranger, so let's let him join our gang!"

The Kid nodded, and two of the ruffians hurried to the man Rusty had been fighting, slashed the cords from his wrists and ankles. As the dirty, greasy-looking Mexican scrambled to his feet, he cursed the Ranger in border Spanish.

"So you're organizin' a gang, Kid?" Rusty drawled. "I thought yuh always worked alone."

The Montana Kid hooked his thumbs in his gun belts and grinned. "Since you ain't goin' to live to tell nobody, I don't mind tellin' you that in another month I'll have a gang powerful enough to run this whole border."

While the Kid was speaking, the stocky Mexican crossed the room to get the two knives he had thrown at Rusty. As he pulled them from the wall and shoved them inside the filthy sash around his thick waist, the Kid grinned and nodded to the others.

"All right," he said sharply. "Tie up this bowlegged Ranger an' put him in the cellar. In the mornin' we'll plant him whar he'll never be found."

Rusty suddenly heaved himself to one knee and slapped his hands to his empty holsters. As he did so, the cold ring of a gun muzzle was jammed against the back of his neck, and a hand gripped his shoulder from behind.

"Lay back thar till we tie yuh!" came a harsh command. "Try makin' any breaks, an' I'll drive a bullet through you."

Rusty stiffened, a scowl twisting his freckled face. For a split second, he thought of trying to throw himself aside and reaching his feet. But another idea flashed into his head and he dropped back to the floor.

The hombre with the gun shoved the weapon back into its holster and pulled a length of pigging string from the belt of his brush-scarred chaps. As he moved forward, Rusty clenched his teeth and twisted partly around. The paunchy ruffian stooped and reached to grab Rusty's hands, but the Ranger pivoted and drove both feet against the man's stomach in a smash that hurled him backward against the Montana Kid.

Startled yells and oaths burst from the other men as Rusty rolled over and came up on his hands and knees. A gun roared almost against the side of his head as he dived headlong between a pair of legs and brought their owner down with a crash that shook the building. With bullets splitting the air around him, he knocked the candle to the floor and darted behind the bar.

"Git him!" bellowed the Montana Kid. "Don't let him git away. Slap a bullet through him!"

Rusty stumbled noisily over a stack of old bottles and fell to the

floor. A hail of bullets ripped through the flimsy pine bar and showered him with splinters.

"We got him!" an outlaw bawled. "I heard him fall. Git around there an' blow him apart!"

Heaving himself to one knee, Rusty fumbled behind him. A rush of feet sounded in the darkness at the end of the bar, and he began hurling bottles as fast as he could snatch them up.

Yells of surprise and pain sounded from the ruffians. The red blaze of a gun lighted the darkness, and the old mirror on the back bar was shattered by a bullet that almost grazed the top of Rusty's red head.

Guided by the flash of the outlaws' guns, the Ranger hurled his bottles with better accuracy. But the men had scattered now and were shooting from different directions. Soon, he realized, a bullet would cut him down.

He hurled the last of the bottles, and raced toward the big window at the end of the bar. Before the outlaws realized what he was up to, he dived headlong through the lower sash and landed upon the old sidewalk outside in a shower of shattered glass. Without a pause, he scrambled to his feet and sped on.

Loud cursing and the pound of booted feet sounded behind him. He barely reached the shelter of a building across the narrow street before a hail of bullets came whizzing after him.

Breathing heavily, Rusty climbed a window. He darted one quick look at the dim forms of the Montana Kid and his amigos, then raced on and scrambled through the window of another building.

With his ears still ringing from the crash of guns, the Ranger darted in and out among the old buildings. When he had dodged the last of his pursuers, he sat down in the darkness beside a small adobe shack at the edge of town to catch his breath.

"I got to sneak back now," he told himself, "an' find the guns I lost when I was fightin' that damn Mexican. When I get 'em, I'll shoot the pants off the Montana Kid an' his pards."

But Rusty realized he could not risk shooting the Kid until he could question him about Hungry Hawkins and the missing rural captain. The Kid or some of his men might already have murdered Hungry or the Mexican officer. Or they might be holding them captive in one of the old buildings.

Suddenly a faint sound from somewhere close reached Ranger. He tensed, crouching back against the wall and looked hastily about him. But in the faint starlight, he could see nothing. He listened for a moment, then crept warily to the open door and slipped noiselessly inside.

"Damn 'em!" he muttered, picking up a heavy piece of wood. "Some of thet bunch may have passed out there without me seein' 'em. If they jump me in here, I'll wrap this two by four around one of their necks."

A stealthy step sounded from the darkness almost behind him. He jerked swiftly around and lashed out with his club. The roaring blast of a gun almost deafened him. Before he could strike again, he was grabbed in a pair of long arms and almost lifted from the floor.

Battling with the fury of a trapped bobcat, Rusty tried desperately to tear free. He knew that his blow with the club had knocked the gun from the man's hand, and he fought with all his wiry strength to keep him from drawing a second weapon.

Smashing right and left as best

he could, he drove his fists against the fellow's chest and sides. He tried to reach the jaw, but the man kept his face out of the way.

They reeled across the cabin floor and bumped against the wall. Suddenly Rusty tore free and jumped back. As the man lunged to grab him, Rusty ducked aside and kicked him in the stomach. The unknown gent doubled forward with a whistling gasp. Before he could catch his breath, Rusty followed with a right swing that cracked against his jaw like the pop of a bull whip. The man went down as if kicked by a mule.

III.

Stooping over his victim, Rusty pulled a gun from its holster. When he had fastened the fellow securely with some old wire which he found on the floor, he gagged him with his own bandanna and sprang to his feet. He had just located the hombre's other gun when muffled shouts sounded from outside.

"I had an idea thet shot would be bringin' the Kid an' his bunch," Rusty grunted, examining his captured weapons. "I've nabbed one of his polecats, an' if I git a chance, I'll collect some more of 'em. I wish Hungry was with me. We'd settle their hash in jig time."

As Rusty thought of his missing partner, he looked hastily around. He wanted to question the Montana Kid and his men about Hungry, but he knew that if shooting started, it might be too late to learn anything when it stopped.

A muffled whoop sounded out in the darkness. Rusty darted a quick look through the window, then groped his way toward the hombre he had captured.

"I reckon I'd better hide this jasper," he grumbled. "If I have to shoot his pards, I'll have *him* to question when the rookus is over."

Rusty located his captive and dragged him to a corner at the back of the room where he dropped him behind some boxes and a couple of old barrels. He threw some moldy sacks on top of the squirming hombre, as another shout and the thud of feet sounded from a short distance away.

Palming his guns, Rusty moved to the window. He was just in time to see two dim forms appear around the corner of a sagging fence and turn straight toward him.

Rusty started to close the door, but suddenly stopped and stepped back to the window. He stared sharply at the approaching hombres, then thumbed back the hammers of both guns.

"Maybe one of them jaspers is the Montana Kid," he said softly. "If I kin nab him, it'll save huntin' him."

The two hombres were coming closer. They were almost to the corner of the cabin when they stopped and looked warily about them.

"Thet shot come from right around hyar," one of them said harshly. "If somebody took a crack at thet bowlaigged Ranger, he must've got away again. I don't see nobody."

The two ruffians stared for a moment and gripped their guns. At a nod from the taller one, they again came on.

The hombres were almost to the cabin door when a rumble of excited shouts sounded behind them. Rusty recognized the Montana Kid's high-pitched voice. He ducked away from the window and tiptoed swiftly across the floor.

He flattened himself against the

wall as one of the outlaws stepped into the doorway. The other followed close behind him, and the Ranger jerked up his guns.

"Hands in the air!" he said softly.

With a startled curse, the nearest ruffian threw himself backward against his companion, and a flash of gun flame singed Rusty's cheek as a hasty shot jarred the cabin. Before either hombre could dodge clear, a chopping blow of Rusty's right-hand Colt thudded against the taller hombre's head and brought him down across the dorstep.

Rusty's and the other outlaw's guns thundered in one ear-splitting roar. Rusty saw the man stagger, but before he could get in another shot, the fellow threw himself aside and dived around the corner of the shack.

The other outlaws were now coming on the run. Rusty dragged his second victim inside and slammed the door as a burst of gunfire sounded from outside.

Bullets ripped through the panels around his head, but he shoved the heavy latch in place. Splinters stung his face, and he felt the wind of a slug that grazed his cheek.

Working swiftly, he tied his unconscious captive's wrists behind him with the fellow's own bandanna. That done, he again snatched his guns and sprang to the window.

The outlaws were almost to the door when a shot from Rusty's left-hand gun sent them ducking aside. They scattered and threw themselves down behind rocks and piles of wind-blown sand. Rusty crouched and leveled his gun across the window sill.

"You might as well come on out, Ranger!" yelled the Montana Kid. "Come on out with your hands up and I'll let you live. If you don't, we'll drag you out!"

"I'm just waitin' fer somebody to try draggin' me out of here!" Rusty snapped back. "You damned—"

Rusty's voice was drowned by the blast of a gun, and a bullet tore a shower of splinters from the window frame beside his face. He marked the flash of the gun and fired a return shot. More bullets split the air about his head.

For a moment, the Ranger was forced to crouch lower to escape the lead that whizzed above him. Bullets tore chunks of adobe from the walls and filled his lungs with choking dust.

But as the first wild burst of shooting slowed down, Rusty again shoved his guns across the sill and began firing at the flashes of the outlaws' weapons.

IV.

A bullet tugged at the sleeve of his shirt and clanged though an old tin washboiler on the wall across the room. Rusty fired and heard a sharp grunt and a bellowed oath.

A slug from another direction tore splinters from the window frame beside his face, and he twisted partly around, firing again.

Suddenly there came a call from the Montana Kid, and the outlaws stopped shooting. Rusty heard a low rumble of voices and a few muffled clicks that told him the men were reloading their guns. The Ranger grunted and hurriedly reloaded his own .45s.

There came another low call from the Montana Kid. As Rusty leaned closer to the window in an effort to see what the hombres were doing, he heard a chorus of oaths that was instantly drowned by a crash of gunfire and the rapid thud of feet.

With bullets again whizzing around him, Rusty jumped back and jerked up his guns. The charging

outlaws were nearly to the door when his second shot sent one sprawling on the ground. As another stumbled and fell near the doorstep, the rest swerved aside and threw themselves down behind anything that would hide them.

A scowl twisted Rusty's face as he crammed cartridges into his guns. He had just closed the loading gates on both weapons when another growl of voices sounded from outside.

"Hey, Ranger!" came a harsh call from the Kid. "Aire yuh ready to give up yit? We're comin' right on in thar this time, an' we'll riddle yuh with lead."

Rusty started to shout a reply, but caught himself in time. With guns poised, he silently shifted his position and tried to get a glimpse of the Kid. He stared for a moment, then shook his head.

"Thet polecat knows better than to stick his head up where I kin see it," he said softly.

A sudden thought flashed into the Ranger's head, and he tiptoed hastily to the back of the room.

"Why ain't I thought of this before?" he muttered. "There can't be more than four left, an' two of them is already hurt. There was six to start with, an' I've got two of 'em tied in here. If I kin skyline 'em against the starlight—"

"Hey, in thar!" came an interrupting shout from the Kid. "This is yore last chance, Ranger."

Without replying, Rusty dropped into a crouch against the rear wall where he would have a clear shot through the doorway. With both guns cocked and poised, he gave a shuddering groan and stamped heavily upon the floor with his foot.

Startled oaths burst from the outlaws. There came a muffled remark from the corner of the cabin, then a stealthy step sounded near the window.

"Inside an' drag him out!" bellowed the Kid. "He'd down. I heard him fall. One of us must've hit him a while ago."

A rush of feet sounded from outside. As heavy bodies hit the door, Rusty crouched lower and raised his guns.

For a moment, the old latch held. The Montana Kid's piercing voice shrilled above the uproar as he and his pardners hurled themselves again and again at the door.

Rusty waited. Suddenly there came a rasping screech and a splintering crash. The door sagged inward and went down, and the Kid and his ruffians crowded inside.

Like a flash, Rusty's weapons chopped down, flamed and roared. His first shot ripped through the nearest hombre's shoulder and staggered him against the side of the door just as an outlaw bullet grazed the side of Rusty's red head and stung the top of his ear.

Outlaw and Ranger guns jarred the cabin, and powder smoke filled the little room. A bullet slapped through the sleeve of Rusty's shirt and burned a stinging groove along his arm above the elbow.

Suddenly a blaze of light flared up just outside the door, and Rusty could smell the scent of burning tumbleweeds above the reek of powder smoke. A yell burst from the Montana Kid, and he threw himself aside out of the glare of the fire.

A pair of guns roared from beside the door, and Rusty felt the bite of a bullet that grazed his hip. He threw himself aside and ducked just in time to escape another slug that split the air where he had been standing and knocked a shower of adobe from the wall.

Rusty caught a glimpse of the Montana Kid and one of his ruffians in the shadow just inside the door. As the guns of both outlaws chopped down to finish him, Rusty dropped to one knee and fired.

For a split second, Rusty was blinded by the flash of their blazing weapons. As he jumped to one side and thumbed his Colt hammers for another shot, there came a hoarse cry, and he saw the Kid take a staggering step toward him. The killer clutched for a moment at his bullet-torn throat, then pitched forward on his face and rolled over.

Before the Ranger could twist around and fire at the one remaining outlaw, he saw the fellow suddenly jerk upright with a scream of agony and drop his guns. As he spun around and slumped against the wall, Rusty saw the handle of a big knife sticking out from between his shoulders.

"What the hell!" Rusty gasped, staring. "I know damned well I didn't throw *thet!* Who in hell—"

At that instant, a grinning face appeared around the side of the door in the red glare of the burning rubbish and tumbleweeds. It was the Mexican Rusty had fought back in the old saloon.

"Don't shoot, señor," the Mex called, chuckling. "Eet ees only me."

Rusty stared. "Say, who in hell are you anyhow?" he barked. The first time I run into you, you was flingin' them stickers at me. Now you use 'em to help out. What's the big idea?"

The hombre showed white teeth in a wide grin. "Our first fight was what you call the meestake, señor," he laughed as he stepped inside. "I took you for an outlaw een the darkness. I am Captain Lopez of the rurales, an' I had been looking for thees Montana Kid you have just shot."

Rusty's mouth sagged open, and he slowly lowered his guns. "Yuh was huntin'—say, listen! While you was chasin' this Kid, I had a pard out tryin' to find *you.* He's a long-geared, lantern-jawed gent, as homely as a mud fence on a rainy day. Have yuh seen him anywhere?"

A muffled grunt sounded then and there was an upheaval in the pile of rubbish in the corner. "If you'd looked to see who you was kickin' in the stummick a while ago, you'd have found me," came a drawling voice. "Come around hyar an' git this wire offn me, will yuh?"

Rusty turned around with a startled yelp. He sprang forward just as Hungry Hawkins' familiar face appared around the side of the nearest barrel.

"I'll be damned!" Rusty gasped. "First, this hombre comes to locate the Montana Kid. You pull out after him, then I have to come huntin' all of you."

Hungry smiled grimly and then shrugged. "Waal," he drawled, looking up, "you got us all, didn't you? What are you augurin' about? Now git this wire off my wrists an' ankles, so I kin help you tie up them two cripples I see tryin' to set up out thar. Some of 'em might git away on you."

WALLOP

THE ANGEL OF GOLIAD

A WOMAN had entered Goliad with the Mexican Army, the Señora Alvarez, who soon became known to the American soldiers as the "Angel of Mercy." She was sympathetic, kind-hearted and beautiful. She had influence enough with Colonel Garey, the Mexican officer in charge of the prisoners, to save the lives of many Texans who but for her pleadings would have been shot.

When she arrived with her husband, the prisoners of Major Miller were bound with cords that were drawn so tight that the circulation of the blood in their arms was completely stopped, and they were in great pain. They had been in this condition for several hours without any relief from their sufferings when the Angel of Goliad saw them.

Her heart was deeply touched at the sight of the brave victims of Mexican torture, and she ordered the cords to be removed at once and had refreshments brought to the unhappy man. On the morning of the massacre she learned that they were all to be shot, and she was overcome with horror. She pleaded with Colonel Garey to save as many as he could. Garey was a humane officer, and his heart revolted at being commanded to carry out this brutal order of Santa Ana. He risked his own life by not obeying the tyrant's mandate in full, and as a result of the good Angel's mediation and Colonel Garey's kind heart some of the Texans were left to tell of that fatal day.

The prisoners were confined in the old Mission La Bahia and did not know that Santa Ana had given orders to have them all shot. Those who had been saved through Señora Alvarez were told by Colonel Garey to go to his quarters and stay there. Two doctors were among them, and they thought they were sent to attend to some sick or wounded men. They were startled shortly after entering the tent to hear a volley of firearms. Colonel Garey came and told them that they had been spared by executive command.

Through the trees they could see some of the prisoners running with all speed, and right behind them were Mexican soldiers in hot pursuit. In the course of five minutes they heard as many as four distinct volleys fired in different directions. Irregular firing was kept up for nearly two hours before it stopped.

Señora Alvarez was in the street when the shots were fired. She saw the sick and wounded dragged out of the hospital into the fort and heard the firing that shot them to death. She was frantic with grief and anger, and she was heard to exclaim: "God will surely curse you, Santa Ana, for the disgrace you have brought upon this country!"

The good deeds of Señora Alvarez have lived throughout the hundred years that have passed since that day. Her memory is revered by Mexicans and Texans, and she will always be known as the Angel of Mercy and the Angel of Goliad.

WARRIOR'S RED ROUNDUP

by WILLIAM F. BRAGG

WARRIOR'S RED ROUNDUP

Shot! Trapped! Betrayed! Ambushed! Dakota Dan Burke battled friend and foe to stop that Indian rampage!

By William F. Bragg

CHAPTER I.

RIVER AMBUSH.

A GAUNT roan longhorn, with a big UO brand burned on its right ribs, stepped out of the shallows of Gunlock River in the gray, ghostly dawn. It halted, stretched out its neck, and bellowed until the echoes rang back from the shadowy cliffs along the valley. Nine cattle of the same brand, breasting the stream's swift current, hurried their pace as they heard the leader's signal that all was well.

Dakota Dan Burke, tall young river scout, sitting his tired bay pony on the sandy beach, smiled grimly as the roan trudged past him. Here, he thought, was a job well finished. Within a few hours he would prove to the hotheaded old owner of the UO, Uncle Joe Ord, that white rustlers were running off his fat cattle rather than the hungry young warriors of old Kicking Horse's band of Stone House Indians.

Bad Ax, nephew of the stern old chief, the boy who had shown Dan the secret trail that led to a rustlers' hide-out on the reservation where the UO could be hot-ironed into the Stone House Snake brand, began pulling his faded shirt down over his coppery-colored upper body. He had removed it during the cold wet work of swimming the longhorns.

Two of Bad Ax's friends, Pretty Fox and Shut Eye, were still in the river, halfway across, pushing on the laggard cattle. Dan could hear their low voices as they called back and forth in the soft Stone House language.

But ten days before, this crossing had echoed to a different music than Indian lingo. Then three squadrons of the Fifty-first Cavalry, commanded by Colonel Starling, had eased their sorrel mounts through the water, while from this beach upon which Dan now rested the field music of bugles had made troopers and horses forget that it was cold and that they had many dusty miles to march before they would arrive at their new station in Fort Laramie to the east.

"Yore uncle," Dan drawled to Bad Ax, "will shore feel good when he hears we found these cattle. An' proved to Uncle Joe that his people ain't runnin' off UO stuff fer beef. That they can run their own business under white folks' law without soldiers to ride herd on 'em."

Head muffled by the folds of his red calico shirt, Bad Ax grunted an answer. Dan couldn't understand the words. But he smiled again, knowing well that this young brave had high ambitions to some day become chief of the band, and that by rooting out rustlers on the reservation he hoped to win high favor with powerful palefaces like Uncle Joe.

Bad Ax sat an Indian-style sad-

dle fashioned from rawhide and cottonwood. It was cinched down on the back of a nervous black-and-white pinto pony. The Indian's rifle rested across his overall-clad knees as he wrestled with his shirt. From his belt was hung a sheath containing a long skinning knife with handle fashioned from elkhorn and decorated with the carving of a war hatchet, the boy's name sign that some day would decorate his chief's shield.

"Ten!" muttered Dan as the last longhorn trudged up the sandy beach and filed after the rest along broad trails that led eastward into the vast UO beef range.

DAKOTA DAN BURKE

Pretty Fox and Shut Eye, halting their ponies at the edge of the stream, kept up their chattering and laughter while their weary mounts drank. For hours Dan and his red friends had been driving the ten contrary longhorns across the reservation by the light of the moon. They hoped that rustler scouts had not followed them or sent word ahead of their coming.

Bad Ax thrust his head through the neck of the calico shirt. He grinned broadly, dark eyes flashing.

"Heap better," he grunted, "when Injun no wear paleface clothes. Rub all over with bear grease. Swim any river then, never feel any cold—"

Bang! From the base of the big butte that loomed above the stream and was known as War Butte by the Indians, a rifle cracked a bullet.

In the dim light, the muzzle flare burst upon Dan's startled gray eyes like the fiery trail of a shooting star.

Bad Ax choked out a yell, flung up his arms that were confined by the folds of his shirt. His pinto whistled and jumped ahead.

The young brave tumbled off, struck the sand, lay there quivering, face down, and with a streamer of swift scarlet slanting down toward the muddy water from his limp body.

Dan reached for the carbine that he carried across his saddle front. He flipped the stock to his shoulder. His spurs drove his snorting bay mount straight up the beach toward the black shadows below the butte.

Another bullet screamed past him. He heard now the startled yells of Pretty Fox and Shut Eye, the splashing of water as they whirled their ponies to seek cover.

Dakota Dan, gray eyes narrowed grimly, lean jaw thrust out above the dark scarf that encircled his brown neck, rode straight for the ambush.

Method lay back of this apparent madness. He rode to protect the helpless nephew of a chief from further gunfire. For, if these renegades succeeded in starting trouble along the river, then men would die and troops would return to the fort.

The color of his pony blended with the background of swift muddy

river rushing between its brown gumbo banks. Nor did Dan wear bright garments. His lean, raw-boned frame was clad in flannel shirt, cowhide vest, bat-wing chaps, spurred boots. On his head he wore a wide-brimmed hat with a stamped leather band around the crown.

Whang! The third bullet cut a hole through the top of the hat. Dan felt it tug at his thick thatch of sandy hair. He wrinkled his big sunburned nose, quirked one corner of his wide thin mouth.

"Comin' a little nigher," he chanted softly. "Buzzard Roosters —I'll bet a month's pay."

For this gang, led by one Slinger Geer, was reputed to be launching raids on both white and Indian cattle from the Buzzard Roost mountain headquarters west of the Tetons on the Idaho line.

The carbine carried seven live loads, one in the barrel, six in the box. Dan was riding in cautiously, aiming for the long black shadows, cast by coming dawn light, that now stretched down the beach from War Butte.

He hoped as he centered on the spot where he had sighted the muzzle burst that they hadn't killed poor Bad Ax. The chief loved the lad like a son. Hard to say what he would do if they carried the lad's dead body home, strapped across the back of the pinto war pony. Kicking Horse might remember that twenty years before he had led howling braves to battle against the whites.

Dan pressed his hair trigger. His rifle stock jumped against his braced shoulder. The bay pony flung up its head nervously, panic-stricken by the crashing echo of the report above its pointed ears, the sharp tang of burned black powder on the brisk Wyoming hill wind.

Dan's bullet drew a return slug from his left flank. He stuck his right spur into the ribs of the bay, jumped the horse to cover on that side as a six-gun bellowed.

The flash of gunfire outlined a man's blocky red face, half covered with a wiry stubble of red whiskers, and surmounted by a tall black hat. There seemed also a black shadow over the man's right eye.

"Slinger Geer!" Dan gasped, and charged the knot of cottonwood timber from which the gun hawk had fired.

Risking death was part of the river scout's job. If he could down this red-bearded leader of the Buzzard Roosters, he'd prove effectually to all white cattlemen that the Indians were peaceful, not beef rustlers, and deserving of good treatment now that the Great White Father had taken away the soldier guard.

More than gratitude for fair treatment received from Kicking Horse and his people drove Dakota Dan toward Slinger's ambush. His father, Tip Burke, old frontiersman, had once been saved from the torture post by Kicking Horse when other Indians desired Tip's scalp. And Tip—now running a small store on the reservation near the deserted fort—had sworn he would aid the Indians' fight to become wise and businesslike as white men. And had drawn his son, young Dan, top cowboy and horseman, into the deal.

The rifle rattled again from the base of the butte. The bullet that sang past the bay pony's head worked the nervous animal into a burst of pitching.

Deciding that he couldn't be bothered with a horse if he met Slinger Geer in a hand-to-hand fight, Dan slid from his saddle. As he dug his boot heels into the sand, the bay

whirled and stampeded back toward the river, seeking the company of the mounts ridden by Pretty Fox and Shut Eye.

Dropping his rifle, Dan reached for his six-gun as he broke into the dark grove of cottonwoods. Above him, they whispered of death with their green and shivering limbs.

Wham! Slinger's Colt blazed a second time. The bullet cut through the flaring wing of Dan's vest.

Flipping up his six-gun, he answered the shot. As his gun roared, he angled toward the pile of driftwood that sheltered the opposing gun swift. He suspected that behind it he would meet Slinger Geer, dread boss of the Buzzard Roosters.

From the direction of the crossing he heard loud whoops, whether Indian or white he couldn't make out. Guns cracked now and then. The ground rumbled to the gallop of horses.

Dan dropped to his knees as the hidden outlaw chanced another bullet. He heard the slug zoom over his head.

The light was getting better, he thought. He regretted now that he hadn't brought along his rifle. One dead gunman wouldn't solve this ambush problem. However if he succeeded in rubbing out Slinger Geer with his .44 Colt, he'd feel something had been gained. That would prove to all *who* had staged this dry gulch and killed the chief's nephew.

Dan ran these thoughts through his mind with a flashing speed, for he was worming his way around the end of the deadfall. His spurs caught on dead branches matted down by soft earth drifted in by spring floods. His fall saved him from a hot slug.

Here was a hot and steamy hole for a fight to the death. Just such a spot as Slinger Geer always selected for his murderous attacks upon honest punchers trailing herds of stolen cattle. Bullets from the flank, ambush guns from the front, thus ran Slinger's strategy. And at least a score of hard-bitten outlaws obeyed his commands and waxed rich on their gains.

As Dan rounded the end of the driftwood heap, a man's shadowy form loomed above him. He saw, on beyond, a second gunman, a huge bulky figure in the gloom. He pitched up his gun, fired blindly.

The butt of a six-gun crashed down on Dan's head. His brain reeled. But for the stiff crown of his hat, the blow would have split open his skull.

Dazed, fighting blindly, he flung his left arm around booted legs that rained kicks upon his body.

His gun was blazing. He heard a hoarse yell of pain, the thudding crash as a man's body slammed against the pile of driftwood, driven against the logs by a heavy .44 bullet.

The outlaw Dan was attempting to capture kicked away from the river scout's clutch. His spurs rang as he galloped out of the grove.

Dan arose on legs that felt numb from the knees down. He shook his head to clear the blur of pain from his eyes and thanked his stars that he hadn't pulled off his hat before crawling into this black hole.

He worked his way through the thicket. He emerged on the beach. The sand was white now and he saw the red glimmer of the rising sun behind the eastern skyline.

The fight appeared over. And he stood alone, hat smashed down on his sore head, legs buckling, barrel of his smoking gun pointed toward the ground.

There wasn't sight nor sound of the three Indians nor their ponies. Even his bay had disappeared. As for the outlaws, they also had fled.

BAD AX

With them the ten head of UO cattle.

"They've won out again," Dan said bitterly. "Slinger Geer and his bunch of Buzzard Roosters."

Hoofs rang against rocks on the trail that ribboned around the steep flanks of War Butte. Two riders were coming down toward the river, men and horses boldly outlined by the new sunlight.

Dakota Dan lurched forward, slanted his gun. Then dropped the point as he recognized the leading man as old Uncle Joe, owner of UO. And at Joe's heels, Duff Shadock, powerful and handsome owner of the Half Circle Six spread.

What, he wondered hazily, brought them here at dawn?

CHAPTER II.

DEAD DRY-GULCHER.

UNCLE JOE ORD, a skinny, gray-bearded man with a voice shrill for howling orders to a roundup crew against a high wind, reined down his cayuse. He glared at Dan with a pair of chill blue eyes and squalled:

"What's all the shootin' about?"

A perfectly reasonable question, Dan knew, because there wasn't a dead man or horse within view.

Duff Shadock, tall and well built, attired also in the fancy leather chaps and handmade boots of a top hand, squinted his eyes that were green and wise as those of a wolf.

"Our Injun-lovin' friend," he drawled sneeringly. And slowly ran his green gaze over Dan's battered form—from dented, bullet-riddled hat to dusty boots.

Dan gestured toward the knot of cottonwoods.

"A Buzzard Rooster's layin' in thar," he explained. "Part of the gang that laid an ambush to stop me an' some Injun boys from returnin' ten head of UO cattle we had found in a rustler hide-out on the reservation."

Dismounting, the two cattlemen trailed Dan into the grove. He expected he would show them the red-bearded face of Slinger Geer. But it wasn't Geer who lay here in a bunch of gooseberry brush. It was a long, slim, sallow-faced cowpoke of the UO outfit named Lon Eaves. Uncle Joe recognized the man.

"Extry hand I hired fer the roundup," he growled, "but one of my boys jest the same. Plugged dead center, too—"

Dan said: "Couldn't help it. It was two men against one. Geer knocked me down with his gun butt. This hombre fired. I pumped back a bullet. Sorta blind. Reckon it was luck that dropped Lon. Anyway—he had it comin'. He might have been an extry UO hand. But he was one of the Buzzard Roosters to boot—"

Duff Shadock sneered: "Big talk,

Burke. Tryin' to cover up fer yore Injun pals."

Dan swung around. "What yuh drivin' at, Shadock?"

"Nuthin' to prove you brought back UO cattle. No sign of Injuns, hosses, or them cattle. Only this dead UO hand. Not even a trace of Slinger Geer. Mebbe Lon spotted yuh up to somethin' raw. An' yuh killed him an' then framed this tall yarn when yuh see us come over the hill."

Shadock stood in front of a knee-high cottonwood log. Uncle Joe was bending over Lon's limp frame.

Dan took one step toward Shadock, balling his right hand into a tight fist.

"You been jumpin' me fer weeks because me an' my dad like to see these Injuns git a 'squar' deal. That's yore right. You've probably stole a heap of their grass. But when yuh call me a killer— a *coyote killer*—"

Shadock reached for his six-gun, green eyes glinting as he barked. "I back up what I say—"

Dan struck from his hip. His fist cracked off Shadock's smoothly shaven chin. The cattleman's green eyes rolled back. He reeled and fell over the cottonwood log. He lay there with his boots propped up in the air.

Dan leaped forward, jerking his gun to cover Shadock if he retained strength enough to go through with his gunplay.

"Hold it!" Uncle Joe squalled. "I got yuh kivered! Fergit that gun!"

Uncle Joe Ord might squall, but in younger days, when he brought beef up the Texas trail, he was reputed one of the fastest border riders with a Colt.

Dan turned and slowly raised his arms. He had no desire to go to a flaming showdown with the cattleman. For several years he had drawn cowboy's pay from the UO. Only his father's desire that he aid the Indians to get started in the cattle business had caused Dan to quit Uncle Joe's employ.

"Now listen, Uncle Joe," he said mildly enough, but with gray eyes cold as ice. "You ain't throwin' in with this Shadock bird on this killer stuff, I hope. You've knowed me fer years—me an' my dad. Yuh orter know I wouldn't bump off one of yore men except in self-defense."

Uncle Joe snarled: "Mebbe you don't know what brought me down to this river so fast."

"I wondered about that when I see yore dust."

"Couple of hours afore daybreak a bunch of howlin' renygades stampeded my night herd. Three thousand longhorns jumped the bed ground. I got thirty men scourin' the range this minute. Run started from our camp three miles east of War Butte. Me and Sally was follerin' a trail—"

Dan gasped. "*Sally?* What's *she* doin' in yore camp?"

SALLY ORD

Sally was Uncle Joe's yellow-haired, blue-eyed granddaughter, a winsome, spirited lass who could ride as well as any cowboy, and Dan's main regret that he had been forced to quit the UO spread.

"Yuh can't keep that spriggins at the ranch," Uncle Joe complained. "She come out yesterday to see how the roundup was doin'. Anxious, yuh know, because I had been losin' so many cattle to these Injun thieves across the river."

"Not *Injuns*, Uncle Joe. Slinger Geer's Buzzard Roosters. I told yuh we had found one of his hide-outs. Picked up ten head of yore stuff. A big roan leadin' 'em—"

Uncle Joe frowned. "Yuh got a tough yarn to prove, Dan. As Shadock said, you haven't perdooced no evidence of what yuh say except the carcass of pore Lon Eaves. Yuh claim self-defense. But yuh kain't even prove *that*."

Dan's quick gaze fastened on the spiny branch of a gooseberry bush near the spot where Geer's gun had dazed him. A long strand of silky white wool hung from the stickers.

"*That* proves two men was here," said Dan, indicating the wool tuft.

"Proves nuthin'," sputtered Uncle Joe. "Nuthin' except that mebbe some sheep grazed here—"

UNCLE JOE ORD

Dan grinned, said: "Excuse me," and lowering his right arm, reached forth and plucked the wool tuft from the bush.

Uncle Joe jumped and squalled, tilting his gun, lining the steel barrel on Dan's lean middle.

"Another quick move like that," he warned, "and I'll let yuh have it."

"You kill me, yuh ornery ol' box-head, an' yuh never will root out this Slinger Geer outfit. I know whar that rustler hide-out is. It may give us a trail to their Buzzard Roost headquarters. With me dead, the Injuns wouldn't show it to you."

"Jest the same, you stand hitched while I'm holdin' a gun on yuh."

Dan laughed, wiggled the white tuft of wool in the breeze.

"Ain't been a sheep here in thirty years," he said. "So why should this stuff be hangin' to a sticky bush? Because it was pulled off a man's Angory goatskin chaps. Cold mornin'. Slinger Geer was keepin' his legs warm. So that proves two men jumped me."

"Proves two men were here? How?"

Dan pointed toward Lon Eaves' body.

"Because Lon ain't wearin' goat-skin chaps. So—this wool proves it come off the other man's. An' since I seen Geer's red whiskers and that black patch over his eye when he fired on me, I figure it was Slinger tore his breeches gittin' outta this hole."

Uncle Joe pawed his spiky gray beard. A puzzled look crept into his eyes as he gazed first at Lon's legs, clad in bullhide chaps, then at the silky white wool which Dan held.

"Sounds reasonable," he mut-tered, "but it's dang little to back

up yore tall story of stolen cattle, rustlers' ambush, a dead Injun—Bad Ax, yuh called him—an' all yore other red pals and hosses gone. Even my dang cattle—"

Dan and the cattleman were so intent on their talk that they failed to note Duff Shadock had pulled his boots off the cottonwood log. Suddenly Shadock stuck his head above the log, and at the same time lined his six-gun on Dan.

Dan whirled as he heard the click of the gun hammer. He saw Shadock's green eyes blazing with the killer glare. He believed that within the space of a man's breath a slug would drive into his body. He lunged forward, a desperate effort to save himself.

Blam! Uncle Joe's gun roared. The bullet cut splinters from the top of the dried-out log, and sawdust, flying up, filled Shadock's green eyes.

Whang! Shadock's gun exploded. The bullet blazed past Dan's bobbing head. Only the intervention of Uncle Joe had saved the river scout from death.

As Dan dodged from danger, he placed the palm of his left hand upon the log. He vaulted over, crashed down upon Shadock as the latter cursed and clawed the sawdust from his blinded eyes.

Dan ground his knees into Shadock's ribs. He dug his thumbs into the cattleman's neck. He looked down into Shadock's reddening face as the would-be killer gasped for breath.

"You treacherous polecat!" rasped Dan. "Tryin' to kill me cold! Dang yuh—I aim to tear yore head offn yore ugly neck!"

Shadock, unable to speak, sought vainly to tilt his gun, ram the front sight against Dan's heaving chest, put a shot through the river scout's heart. But Dan, releasing his left hand from its tight clutch on Shadock's neck, grabbed the gun barrel. And, with a mighty jerk, tore it

DUFF SHADOCK

from Shadock's clutch so fiercely that he scraped all the skin off Shadock's trigger finger.

Fired to red heat by anger, Dan raised the gun, intending to batter in Shadock's skull with the barrel. But Uncle Joe, leaping over the log, flung his arms around the sinewy form of the river scout and dragged Dan off Shadock's writhing body.

"You've killed one man this mornin'," shouted Uncle Joe. "You ain't clear on that. Don't beef a second."

Choked with anger, gray eyes flaming, Dan raged: "You saw that skunk throw down on me when I had my arms up. I tell yuh, fer some damn reason, he aims to kill me. But he ain't man enough to go to the limit in a dead squar' way. He hates me an' my dad because we've throwed in to help out Kickin' Hoss."

Uncle Joe squalled: "Don't fergit, yuh wall-eyed ranny, that he would 'a' killed yuh if I hadn't smoked him up fust."

Dan's anger cooled. He reached out his right hand, puffy now from the force with which it had landed on Shadock's chin.

"Thanks, Uncle Joe," he said sheepishly. "Sorta lost my temper. Reckon you would, too, in a similar tight. Thanks—yuh did save me."

"I saved yuh, by glory, so's I could uncover this blind trail of Buzzard Roost rustlers, missin' an' dead Injuns, wool offn a man's Angory goat chaps. An' one of my men dead with a bullet hole through his brisket. That's why I'm keepin' yuh alive, Dan!"

Thrusting Shadock's gun down behind his overalls waistband, Uncle Joe marched Dan out to the river beach, leaving Shadock to regain breath and nerve. In the open he forced Dan to unbuckle his gun belt, allow it to fall to the ground, then step away from it. Uncle Joe was cautious. He didn't intend to allow this speedy young artist with firearms or fists to run around armed. Not until the river ambush and the stampede back on the divide had been satisfactorily cleared up.

Uncle Joe proved fair enough when it came to reading the plain sign. Red marks indicated where Bad Ax had dropped off his pony. There were hoofprints where a pony had been spurred down to the Indian's body recently, and dents in the sand indicating a man wearing high-heeled boots had dropped off his mount briefly. There were no marks to show that Pretty Fox and Shut Eye had ridden out of the river to get into the fight.

Dan said bitterly, staring across the river toward the shadowy brush that hid the Indian side:

"They run like rats. Mebbe yo're right. Injuns won't fight like whites. Mebbe I was wrong to trust 'em. If they was here, they'd prove all I'm tellin' you."

"They ain't here. So they're out. But this sand shows a man shore laid here recent, dead or wounded. Another rid up later. Likely packed the body away on his hoss. But we can't foller for he swung his hoss into the shaller water and hid his trail as he was goin' away."

What angered Dan was that the rustlers had also picked up his rifle. But he felt cheered a few moments later when he discovered his bay pony tangled up by the slack of trailing bridle reins in a patch of chokecherry trees.

"We'll head fer camp," Uncle Joe said grimly. "See if we can find out what become of them ten UO critters led by the roan." His leathery old face wrinkled up anxiously as he looked up the trail around War Butte.

"I'm shore worried about my night herd," he admitted. "If the rustlers—red or white—git away with five or six hundred head, it'll about bust me in business. Yuh know, Dan, if that happens, pore Sally won't have nuthin' to live on when I cash in. Forty years I been runnin' cattle. She's all I got." He blinked his eyes and for a moment they no longer looked cold. "All I got," he muttered.

He led Dan up the steep trail. Shadock, he declared, could follow when he had cooled off. They'd send cowpokes back to fetch Lon's body.

Although the two men, both expert sign readers, watched for tracks, they uncovered little in the ride that took them to the key ridge running into the flank of the towering butte with its square, yellow, rimrocked top.

It was a dry summer. The ground was hard. They saw the

With a quick jerk, Dan snatched the medicine man from his pony and heaved him to the ground!

marks of cattle coming and going from water. But thousands of longhorns ran in this rolling buffalo-grass range. And it was apparent that Slinger Geer and his ambushers had not ridden this give-away path.

Uncle Joe, halting on a brown ridge, gestured toward a line of sandstone boulders on a hill to his right.

"Sally went thataway," he explained. "We was follerin' a trail, mebbe of fifty critters. Then Duff Shadock swung up."

"*Shadock?* Wasn't he with yuh from the start?"

"Should 'a' been. Slept in my camp last night. But in the hustle of turnin' out in the dark when we heard the cattle runnin', a feller wouldn't notice who was around. But, as I was sayin', jest after Sally

turned off toward them sandstone rocks, Duff come up. I waited fer him, figurin' mebbe he had bunched up some of my stuff in a gulch an' needed help. While I was waitin', we heard gunfire from down nigh the river. So we went down the trail on the high run!"

Dan nodded. "That shows Duff wasn't in the ambush," he granted.

"Why would Duff ambush you?"

Dan shook his head. "Search me. Only he's called me a renegade since I hired out to ride the river for the Injuns."

They shook up their horses. Suddenly they heard from the direction of the line of sandstone blocks, three spaced rifle shots.

Uncle Joe shouted: "Sally rode that way! If anything's happened to that girl!"

But Dan never heard the old cattleman. As the shots rang out, he dug his long-shanked spurs into the ribs of his fleet bay. He was fifty yards across the flat when Uncle Joe rolled his hooks. He rode recklessly, loose-reined. He forgot that Uncle Joe was carrying his gun belt, that he was, therefore, unarmed except for his hard fists.

As the fierce wind thrust back the battered brim of his hat, he saw before him the winsome face of Sally Ord. If anything deadly happened to the pretty girl in this wicked game Slinger Geer's gang was playing on Gunlock River, then Dan Burke's stout heart would break.

CHAPTER III.

A RIDE FOR LIFE.

FLOCKS of sandstone loomed before Dan as his bay shot up the slope under the drive of ever-prodding spurs. One misstep and the pony would crash into a rock, crush itself and rider to a red death. The cautious way would have been to ease down, find a sure trail.

But Dakota Dan shook out his rawhide ribbons. He was leaning over his saddlehorn, eyes narrowed under the shadow of his hat. The red sun burned his sharply featured face. The ground seemed to roll toward him like the ragged breakers of the ocean striking a rough reef.

The lean rider, anchored by his spurs, was aiding the willing bay to maintain footing. Once the horse picked up a rock, stumbled ahead for ten long yards, almost pitching over on its nose.

Dan caught it up with a yank, straightened the animal out, plunged toward the rimrock in a shower of dust and gravel.

He felt beneath him the surge and swaying of whiplike muscles as the bay pony ran out its heart and wind climbing that steep hogback. The faith of horses, their loyalty, all their steadfast qualities, served Dakota Dan well this red dawn on the Gunlock River.

Reaching the ridge, he swept the grassy basin below it with one long sweep of keen gray eyes.

Across the dangerous ground, spotted with heavy clumps of gray sagebrush, flecked with long bars of sandstone outcrops, galloped a gray horse. It was stampeding toward the farther side of the basin on a quartering course to that Dan had just followed.

Tightly grasping the saddlehorn, a slim figure bent and swayed to the plunging gallop of the gray. Long yellow hair streamed back in the wind. There was a flutter of buckskin riding garments.

"Sally!" Dan shouted—although his voice could not carry to the girl's ears above the thunder of hoofs, the whine of the wind. "Sally—*hang on!*"

As he threw in his spurs, Dan couldn't understand why the gray was running away with the girl. She was an expert rider. But there was no time now to ponder the problem. The gray must be halted, the girl taken from the saddle before she was thrown into the rocks or a cinch broke.

Once Dan had seen a comrade dragged by a runaway pony and never had he forgotten the terrible sight of crushed body, battered head. It wrung his heart to picture the fair Sally Ord brought to the brink of such a frightful death.

The trail into the basin was a narrow pathway, cut out by the patient hoofs of wandering cattle and range horses. The bay could easily enough have galloped down it without a rider on its back. But the extra weight made balance uncertain for the faithful pony. Only the daring horsemanship of Dan, his constant hand steadily gripping reins that led to the straight bit, the wise prod of spurs in tight places, held the bay upright on its hammering hoofs.

A cut gulch loomed suddenly before Dan. He felt his mount quiver beneath him. For the jump appeared too lengthy for its stride.

Narrowing his eyes, estimating the distance, Dan decided to risk the leap. There was no time to swing, canter down the rim, find a safer crossing. Every second of delay increased the distance between himself and the stampeding horse carrying the yellow-haired girl in buckskins to her death.

Throwing his lean frame forward over the outstretched neck of his mount, Dan pricked up the pony with his spurs. He rolled the steel hooks as the pony attempted to pause on the brink, swerve away on twisting hind quarters.

Breath whistling through its wide red nostrils, eyes bulging, the bay soared birdlike through the air. Dan glimpsed, far beneath him, huge rocks in the bottom of the gulch, rocks white and dry-looking as human skulls and bones.

And something else he saw that sent chills up his backbone. A hastily caught glimpse of a man's body stretched out amidst the boulders in the coulee, a man clad in the blue overalls of a cowhand.

Then, with a crash, the bay struck the opposite lip of the gulch. The dry gumbo wall began caving in. There ensued a long and terrific moment of struggle as the horse battled to prevent losing its feet, rolling down into the gulch, falling atop its gallant rider.

Leaning far ahead, throwing his weight forward, driving with spurs, Dan brought the bay up on firm ground. Though the animal was quivering with weariness and the pound of its courageous heart shook its body, Dan showed no mercy to his top mount.

On the strength and fortitude of the bay depended the life of Sally Ord.

Dan felt certain that few horses in central Wyoming could outrun the bay. It carried a heavy strain of tough Morgan, and he had broken the mount for cattle and rope work. He called it Snapper, due to its bright and cheery nature.

"Snapper!" he prayed. "*One more jump* before yuh go down!"

Then, as he reached the haze kicked up by the flying legs of the gray, he prayed for another jump. Gravel, showering back, slashed Dan's face. He blinked his eyes, rode but the swifter.

He could see Sally's swaying form more plainly although the dust was puffing up thickly, rendering sight

difficult. He estimated he was within gun range of the gray. If he creased its hip with a bullet, he might retard its speed, easily overtake it, take Sally from the saddle.

His right hand swept toward his belt. And there was no saving gun. He groaned, recalling that Uncle Joe had taken his artillery.

But on his low-forked saddle there hung a coil of lariat. A well-seasoned rope which had hauled many a bawling calf up to the branding fires.

Dan unhooked the leather thong that held the coil to the horn as he rode. He gathered up his reins, gripped the rope slack in his left hand, shook out a noose with his right.

Now the two horses were thundering along, almost neck to neck. Sally's white face looked through the yellow haze straight into the brown and hard-set features of Dakota Dan as he brought his bay past her stirrup.

He saw then why she couldn't control the gray. Its bridle reins were whipping it around its knees as it ran. In some manner, Sally had dropped the ribbons, and the spooky cayuse had bolted. She, wise horsewoman, had clung to the saddle.

Like all riders of the Gunlock River, Dan had dabbed a loop on his share of horses. But those galloping ponies had not carried pretty girls on their backs. In ordinary cases, the puncher shot his lariat noose, speared the pony around its neck, took a dally around his own saddlehorn and brought the runaway animal up so that nine times out of ten it was jerked off its feet and fell with such a crash that it lay stunned on the ground.

Dan dared not to abruptly check the stampede of the gray. He shot his noose, saw it flip down over the runaway's pinned-back ears. But gently as an angler playing a big trout with a fine silk line, he played the gray. He sat back in the saddle now, pitting the weight of the bay against the singing forty feet of lariat line.

The gray bawled as the noose cut into its throat, choking off its wind. But foot by foot, galloping over the rough ground, it decreased its speed. And so came finally to an unwilling halt with head hanging, breath whistling through its nostrils, lariat noose almost cutting off its head.

Then Sally Ord, releasing her tight grip of the saddlehorn, swayed and fell from the saddle. But Dan stood there. He caught the girl's limp body in his arms. She lay there for a long moment. He buried his lips in the yellow curls that covered her small head, whispered her name, imploring her to speak, assure him she was not injured.

A weary grin cracked the dust on his tanned face when he felt the girl's warm body stir in his arms, heard a faint voice answer his entreaties.

"Dan," she half sobbed, "I . . . I trusted in you . . . saw you coming . . . knew you'd reach me in time."

When she had rested and regained her courage, Sally explained why her gray had stampeded. Her red lips quivered, and tears misted her blue eyes as she looked up into Dan's grave face.

"The gray's a broncho," she explained. "Granddad told me not to ride that cayuse. But, when the stampede broke loose among the cattle, I found the gray tied to a chuck-wagon wheel. I galloped away from camp before granddad could stop me. Though he kept

yelling at me all the way across the flats." A smile lightened her pale face. "We were on a trail of runaway cattle that led toward this basin. The moonlight was fairly bright at first. Then it became dark. But we slowed up and kept following toward the river. Just at dawn, we ran into Duff Shadock. He started to tell granddad about some cattle he had rounded up nearer the river—"

Dan frowned. "Shadock—seems he always shows up when yo're ridin' the range, Sally. A bold and handsome varmint."

Sally blushed, tossed her yellow curls. "He doesn't bother me much, Dan. None . . . none of you boys bother me."

Dan bit his lip. After all, like most pretty girls, Sally was a bit of a flirt which but added to her attractiveness. He couldn't blame Duff for admiring this heiress of Uncle Joe. Some day she'd own ten thousand cattle. But though Sally vowed she wasn't interested in affairs of the heart, he couldn't forget that just a few moments before she had whispered that she trusted in one Dan Burke.

She hurried on with her story of how she had galloped off toward the basin leaving her grandfather and Duff Shadock talking on the ridge. She had sighted cattle from the divide, headed down across the flat, sighted several head, bunched and bawling on the edge of a gulch.

Her blue eyes widened. She trembled in her trim garments of red silk shirt and short riding skirt of buckskin that touched the tops of glossy high-heeled boots.

"I crossed the gulch," she went on. "I rode up to where the cattle were standing. Ten head were there."

Dan cried out: *"Ten head?* With a big UO roan?"

"Yes—but that wasn't so surprising, Dan. I suppose there are a thousand UO cattle scattered around here from the stampede. These cattle were bawling because they feared something. It was in the gulch. I thought it might be a coyote. I took out my rifle, rode to the rim, looked down—" She began to weep.

Dan soothed her, taking her shivering body in his arms. For a moment she rested her bright head on his dusty shirt and Dan's heart thrilled. Then, releasing herself from his embrace, she deftly did up her tumbled hair and he watched that mystic rite in open adoration. For the moment, both forgot what Sally had found in the gulch.

Then she spoke, lips parted.

"I *saw a dead man.* A cowboy wearing blue overalls. He was lying face downward. I didn't know him at all. But, Dan, I could see—between his shoulder blades—a knife. With a sort of elkhorn handle."

At her description, Dan recalled the knife with the buckhorn haft that Bad Ax carried on his belt, the weapon on which the boy had carved his war-hatchet totem sign. But it wasn't possible that Bad Ax had followed a white man into this basin and stabbed him to death.

"Sally went on:

"I thought of calling for help. The sight of the dead man startled me. I raised my rifle, fired three shots. The alarm signal. I hoped granddad and Duff would hear. But I was careless. When I fired, the gray jumped. The loose reins dropped to the ground. The bronc stampeded."

He raised Sally from the rock on which she had seated herself for a rest. He declared that she must

ride his bay back across the basin, that he'd take the wire edge off the gray bronco.

"I feel like killin' that cayuse, Sally," he said. "If I had a gun—"

She opened her eyes. *"No gun?* Why not?"

He stammered, seeking to explain why her grandfather had disarmed him. It was difficult.

A cold voice drawled: "Put up yore hands, Burke! I'll do the talkin'!"

Dan whirled. There stood Duff Shadock, a mean grin on his dark face, a six-gun held in his hand and lined on the heart of the river scout.

And beyond Duff were three hard-faced riders, all topping ponies branded on the right hips with Duff's Half Circle Six iron. They hadn't drawn iron, but all had six-guns tied down to their right thighs.

Sally screamed, ran toward Duff. But he laughed and said:

"Don't git scairt. We're here to show up this hombre as a dirty killer. Him an' his Injun friends."

Then Duff rasped out the story of the discovery of Lon Eaves' body down on the river. And how her grandfather, not trusting Dan, had taken away the scout's belt.

Sally bit her lip, crying she didn't believe a word of it. But Duff, advancing on silent Dan, laughed again and said her grandfather would prove the story.

"I picked up my three men," Duff explained, "while comin' up from the river. The tall, black-muzzled one is Haze Parr. That fat one's Red Hoss Rogan. And the chunky man, with the scar on his face and yaller whiskers, is Butcher Knife Badger. All three of 'em is gun swifts an' plumb anxious to pop the neck of this Injun-lovin' renegade."

Butcher Knife Badger, hearing this, bared his yellow teeth in a wolfish grin and flourished the coil of rope he carried.

Sally defended Dan. "Why should you threaten to hang him? He just saved my life. Besides—though he killed Lon Eaves, it appears a clear case of self-defense."

Duff grinned. "Too much self-defense. When we got down into this basin, we found one of yore dad's cowboys in a gulch. Feller wearin' blue overalls. Mebbe you seen him?"

The girl's lips trembled but she didn't speak. She stood listening, bright eyes wary and alert.

"That cowpoke was named Tom Lyons. He was on night guard when yore beef herd stampeded. Looks like he follered down into this basin. He was shot off his hoss, dumped into the gulch. And then some Injun finished him up by stabbin' him in the back with this"—and with left hand Duff jerked a slim knife from his belt and held it up so that Dan Burke saw a war hatchet scrawled on the buckhorn haft.

It was truly enough the knife once carried by Bad Ax, nephew of Kicking Horse. And it had been taken from the back of a murdered cowboy.

Guarded by Duff and his three men, the girl and the scout were taken back to the gulch. She rode Dan's bay. He trudged afoot through the sagebrush.

On the other side of the gulch, Uncle Joe sadly awaited them. The limp form of his cowboy lay in the shade of the sagebrush.

Duff halted his men, ordered them to dismount.

"Butcher Knife," he said, "slip yore noose over Burke's head. We'll pop his neck by shovin' him over the edge of the gulch. It was here

that his red pals killed pore Tom."

Sally screamed, but Duff rasped a cold command:

"Git that bay hoss to movin' fast or we'll show yuh a sight will bring tears to yore purty eyes. This here renegade chokin' in the gulch."

"Can't I say good-by to Dan?" she asked tearfully.

Duff laughed fondly. "I wouldn't deny you a reasonable request, Sally."

She bent from her saddle, whispered to Dan: "My rifle. Where I dropped it. On the edge of the gulch."

Then loudly she said her farewell, circled her horse, galloped down the gulch.

From across the narrow draw, Uncle Joe protested loudly at Duff's quick revenge before Dan's guilt had been proved. But two of Duff's gunmen covered Uncle Joe with their Colts while Duff and yellow-muzzled Butcher Knife advanced to slip the rope over the head of Dan Burke.

From the corner of his eye, Dan saw the light rifle resting on the very rim of the gulch. He dared not reach for it. They'd cut him down with their bullets.

Duff halted a few feet from Dan while Butcher Knife walked up, shaking out the noose.

When Butcher Knife came within reaching distance, Dan shot a straight left toward the man's chin.

With a startled yell, Butcher Knife reeled toward Duff. He blocked the latter's line of fire as the Half Circle Six owner lined his Colt and tried to cut down Dan.

The weapon roared. But the bullet missed its bobbing target.

For Dan was falling over the lip of the gulch in which Tom Lyons had died with a knife in his back. As he leaped to the flank and threw his body over the edge, he hooked his boot toe under the gun that Sally had dropped when her horse stampeded. As he fell, the rifle fell with him.

Man and carbine landed in the soft sand at the bottom of the draw. Instantly, Dan seized the barrel, scuttled like a land crab toward a black hole under the overhang of the bank.

Barely in time he reached the cover, for he heard the roar of guns and saw sand puff up as bullets hit the earth a few feet from where he was hiding.

The whiskered face of a man—the one Duff had named as Haze Parr—peered over the rim. Dan slammed the rifle to his shoulder, fired. With a hoarse yell, Parr disappeared.

"One down," panted Dan. "But—they got me cornered fer keeps!"

CHAPTER IV.

A CALICO CLUE.

DODGING back to escape Dan's gunfire, Haze Parr dislodged a portion of the gulch rim. The earth caved in, carrying with it a small greasewood bush. The débris piled up a few feet from where Dan was crouching.

Something about the bush appeared strange to his eyes, accustomed to the usual drab-brown color. But for the moment, mind intent on his battle for life, eyes alert for sign of his enemy, he couldn't make out just what was different. Then he saw that a bit of red rag fluttered from a branch of the bush.

As the dust settled, he made out the pattern of the rag. It was calico and of the sort favored by Indians for its vivid hue. And for hours, the day before, he had ridden along-

side a young brave who wore a calico shirt of this same pattern.

"Bad Ax," Dan whispered hoarsely, staring eyes on the calico rag. "A strip off his shirt!"

Now he saw that the rag hadn't been torn off by the bush as the gooseberry branches had ripped away a tuft of wool from a rustler's goatskin chaps. This rag had been half-hitched around the greasewood branch. And further, it had been tied underneath the limb so that it would not be easily seen.

It indicated but one thing to Dan Burke. Bad Ax *lived*. But he had been captured by Slinger Geer's gang. They had taken his knife, driven it into the body of poor Tom Lyons to lay the blame for the raid on the UO herd on the Indians.

Knowing that he was being drawn into a murderous plot against his people, the young Indian had taken this means of informing them he lived, that he was a prisoner. For Bad Ax would feel certain that red scouts would search every foot of the ground in which cattle had been stolen and men had died.

White men's duller eyes would not see a red rag tied *underneath* a bush. But Bad Ax knew well that it was in just such hidden places that a red scout would hunt for clues.

Why should this cruel plot be directed against old Kicking Horse's band of Indians? That wasn't difficult for Dan Burke to understand. Released from military guard, these Indians now possessed a hundred square miles of good grass on which to graze the herd of cattle that the government had included in the reservation treaty. White cattlemen, who had formerly ranged their herds on this grass, paying but a nominal fee, were now forced to the east side of the river.

If the Indians could be shown up as still hostile to whites, as thieves and murderers, the troops would return. Kicking Horse and his people would become military prisoners. Their cattle would be sold on the grounds that they could not be trusted to follow the white man's way. And so—those crafty men who had succeeded in their plot—would again range their cattle on Indian grass. For it they would pay but a tenth of its real value.

Duff Shadock ran several thousand head of cattle. There were other cold and hard men of his stripe along the east bank of the Gunlock. Not all—not even the majority of stockmen—were hard and shrewd as Duff. Not even old Uncle Joe. But as Dan thought sadly, in any tree of good sound apples, there are bound to always be a few with rotten hearts.

Hidden in that hot hole in the bottom of the gulch, all the bad luck in the western world apparently resting on his tired shoulders, Dakota Dan vowed he would somehow escape this trap, root out and expose the selfish, murderous men who by their greed might bring red war blazing the length of Gunlock Valley.

The sun blazed down into the coulee. Thirst parched Dan's throat. And although he listened, he heard not a sound of Duff and his gun hawks. To test out their vigilance, he pushed the barrel of his rifle toward the bush on which the calico rag had been tied. As the front sight hooked over the branch, and Dan began dragging it toward his cave, a gun cracked above. A bullet drilled a hole in the ground.

That was a warning to him that this fight had just started. But under the cover of dust kicked up by the slug, Dan jerked the branch to

him, broke it off, stowed it away in his chaps pocket with the tuft of wool from the goatskin chaps.

The time might come, he believed, when evidence such as this would support his exposure of the Indian-grass steal.

But if he exposed that plot, he must live, get out of this gulch. The plight of Sally and her grandfather worried him. But he reflected that Duff Shadock, who clearly showed his affection for the girl, would do nothing to hinder his courtship. And Duff, a cool and shrewd thinker, would not turn Uncle Joe into an enemy.

At the moment, Duff stood victor against Dan Burke and the Indians. Every angle of the morning's work put the burden of proof upon Dan. Uncle Joe—a leader among fair-minded cattlemen—had looked upon the dead faces of two of his men. And one of them—Tom Lyons, a veteran hand—had lain in a gulch with an Indian knife plunged into his honest back.

Dan stared down the gulch, reflecting that Sally had mentioned a crossing. He might escape that way. This draw, gouged out by flood water pouring down from the hills, led toward a bend of Gunlock River. Once hidden in the timber along the stream, he stood a better chance of escaping from Duff, of carrying word to Kicking Horse, the chief.

Removing his hat, he tossed it up the gulch. As it lit, a gun thundered. Whoever lay on guard dared not expose himself to Dan's rifle. The hostile bullets were fast and uncertain. Dan gambled on that.

The moment haze puffed up from the bullet burning into the earth beside his hat, he leaped from his cave. Slanting his rifle, he raced for a sharp angle where the walls cut around a pile of boulders.

He heard, as he ran, a hoarse yell. The guard had sighted his reckless retreat. He was shouting a warning to other men lined out along the rim.

Dan decided, as he flung himself breathlessly behind a boulder, that the guard had not shown wisdom. He should have fired, then yelled. By his shout, he gave the river scout that blessed second of time in which to reach cover.

Craang! A slug screamed off the top of the boulder which protected his lean body.

He dared not waste ammunition returning the fire. There had not been time to ascertain the loads in Sally's rifle. The weapon might carry a full magazine—or none.

The angle in the wall hid him from the guard up the gulch. The moment the slug zipped off the big rock, Dan whirled, raced again down the draw. He swung in toward one side as he darted ahead, the side on which he believed Duff and his men had taken their stations. If they fired, they must lean far out to get a line on his dodging, bobbing body. And in turn, that might give him his chance to flip up his rifle and fire a life-saving bullet.

He felt like a rabbit trapped in a badger hole and running away from some red-eyed ferret. He was fully convinced now that Duff Shadock, playing a game involving thousands of dollars of value in Indian grass, wished to put him out of the way so that he could not inform the old chief and his band of the underhanded work.

But Duff would kill within the letter of the law. At this moment, Dan Burke was a fugitive from justice, involved in the deaths of two cowboys. If Duff shot him or hanged

him, few men who believed in the rough but honest cattle range code would blame him.

Before him appeared a break in the sheer mud wall. The earth had been caved in by cattle, beaten down by hundreds of cloven hoofs. It offered escape from this deadly runway.

Dan whirled around the sharp corner of the crossing. As he turned and started up the trail a horseman spurred down to meet him. It was Haze Parr again. The man was topping Dan's bay horse. For a good reason. He didn't wish to lose his own mount in any gun battle.

The encounter was unexpected. Parr had not expected that Dan would risk flight down the gulch. He had spurred down the trail, hoping to find some position from which he could stage an attack from the rear.

At sight of Dan coming up the steep path, Haze arose in his stirrups. He pitched his Colt, firing down over the ears of the bay.

As the roar rang out, the bay jumped ahead. Its muscular body almost crushed Dan. But he flung himself against the side of the runway.

Haze Parr, rolling his spurs, seeking madly to drive the bay down into the gulch, bent to pitch a second bullet into Dan.

Seizing Parr's gun arm, Dan tore the gun hawk from the saddle. The space was narrow as they struggled, and filled, too, by the quivering frame of the bay.

Dan dropped Sally's rifle and cracked Parr on the chin with his fist. As the man reeled from him, with his right, Dan ripped away the six-gun.

The bay pony was kicking and plunging for Parr had held to the reins as he fell from leather. Now Parr, dazed by Dan's punch, rolled under the kicking legs of the pony. A sharp-shod hoof smashed against his head. He lay quietly then like a dirty pile of laundry.

Flinging up its head wildly, the bay darted on down into the gulch. But as it fled, Dan reached up for the saddlehorn. The horse sought to buck against his dragging weight. But the narrow width of the gulch hindered it. Or in its struggles it might also have kicked Dan Burke to his death.

He dared not release his hold on the horn as the pony bobbed down the coulee. On a mount depended his best chance for life. Nor would he drop the six-gun he had torn from Haze Parr's hand.

Guns crashed and bullets whipped past him. He heard above the hoarse bawling of the bay the thud of its hoofs hitting the bottom of the coulee, the shouts of men, the ring of horseshoes against rock.

They had heard the sounds of his fight with Haze. They had mounted, galloped up, were now in the coulee and riding headlong to kill or capture Dan Burke.

A sharp angle of the mud walls suddenly confronted the stampeding bay. It checked stride to dodge past the obstacle. A bullet whistled past, rang off a rock.

That brief interval gave Dan time to throw his right leg over the bay's humped back. He landed behind the saddle. The reins were trailing on the ground as the bay lunged around the angle and straightened out for a reckless dash toward the river.

Not long before reins had trailed as a maddened gray horse ran away with a yellow-haired girl. Now Dan Burke was in like predicament. But he had broken this pony. He could —if given time—bend from his sad-

dle, reach down to the bit, regain a rein.

Never losing his clutch on the saddlehorn, he lay flat on the pony's back. This to avoid the plunging bullets that trailed him. But every muscle in his lean tough frame leaped and tensed to his determined will, to the strong urge of his heart. He fought—cool-witted, never losing hope—to pull himself over the high saddle cantle, get safely into the seat.

Rocks and brush, protruding from the sides of the gulch, almost tore him off the bay as his dangling boots caught in the obstacles. But each time—when he thought that he would surely be jerked to the ground—the headlong rush of the pony freed him. His spurs were torn off when the buckles broke from the straps. His left leg felt numb where it had scraped against the rough face of a boulder.

Dan's senses reeled. At any moment the bay might plunge into some hole dug out in the bottom of this dangerous gulch by furious floods. Or a bullet from the rear might cut into his bent back.

The small comfort of fighting back was denied him. He understood how a man feels, facing the world with a wall behind his back. That same sort of courage held Dan Burke atop the galloping bay, the grit which impells a man to stay on and on to the bitter end, never quit.

Then—as though the fates had at last taken pity on the grim fighter—the gulch widened. Smoother ground came beneath the flying feet of his pony. An intervening wall briefly gave shelter from the sputtering bullets of the pursuit.

As he felt his mount ease into a steadier run, Dan slowly pulled his lean body into the saddle. The hard surface of leather stirrups offered support to the grind of his knees.

The bay responded, too, to the pressing of knees. Ponies used in cutting out cattle from a herd were thus trained to turn right or left at pressure of the rider's knees.

Galloping on, Dan swung his cayuse by this means around sharp turns in the gulch walls, rocks that loomed suddenly in his path. But though he could turn his mount, it still ran at full speed with neck outstretched and bridle reins slashing its forelegs.

Hooking his right heel far back under the saddle cantle, Dan swung his body low down on the left side. Now if the bay swerved suddenly, he might be crushed against a boulder.

For in attempting to seize a rein, Dan for the moment lost all control over the movements of the horse.

The ground seemed to rush past like a brown current of swift water. His head hung within a few feet of skull-shattering death.

Duff Shadock and the pursuit came within gun range also. For the river scout, reaching out desperately the full length of his left arm to grasp the bridle bit, heard from the rear the whiplike report of a rifle. And saw sand scud past as a bullet zipped into the side of the gulch.

Then his clawing fingers touched the cold steel of the bit, clutched desperately a moment, fighting against the pull of the bay's stout neck. But it was a good straight bit, and against the tongue of a horse its pressure gained mastery for man.

Inch by inch, Dan pulled around the bay's stubborn head. And thus brought the dangling left rein within reaching distance. And so—weakened by his mighty effort, feeling

that any moment his heel might give way and allow his unbalanced body to lurch to the earth—Dan finally laid hand upon the stout rawhide rein.

The moment he felt the ribbon within his grasp, he straightened in the saddle. The rein came up with him, jerking the bay about in a half circle. Thus was its stampede checked. And as the pony's head came up, Dan reached down and deftly speared the right rein.

Thus he gained his mount, and thundered on down the widening gulch toward Gunlock River, wondering as he rode why Haze Parr had ridden his horse. For now it came to him that Sally Ord had mounted this bay, rather than the dangerous gray, for the ride back to the gulch.

Now ahead loomed the line of green timber along the Gunlock. To the north, a few miles up the valley, and on the west bank, were located the buildings of recently abandoned Fort Gunlock and the nearby main camp of Kicking Horse and his band. There, too, was located the small store which Dan's father, old Tip, pensioned scout, had operated for many years. It had been Dan's hope to reach the fort, gain the help of the chief to overcome the plot launched against the tribe's future.

He galloped out across the wide gravel wash where the gulch in the spring poured its foaming burden of flood water into the river. He swung the bay north, hoping to race it across easy ground toward the fort.

But guns cracked from the flank. He saw above him horsemen riding on that side, riding with whip and spur to cut off his advance. The dust rolled thickly. Forms were indistinct. And there was no time to pause now and take bearings.

For riders were racing down the gulch. Their six-guns set up a clatter. With bullets screaming past, Dan faced the bay again toward the river, rode for his life into the cottonwoods.

CHAPTER V.

WAR WHOOPS!

RIDING in the dank brush, Dan felt like a trapped animal. He caught occasional glimpses of Duff and his men far out on the high ground, vigilantly watching all the cattle trails that emerged from the timber. Once he believed he caught sight, too, of Uncle Joe Ord, but at the distance he wasn't certain. However, he never sighted Sally and her gray horse.

Dan's heart grew bitter, and heavy and black were his thoughts as he exerted all his range craft to escape from the net Duff Shadock had thrown around the strip of river timber. The day before he had ridden down toward the river, stolen beef ahead, elated because he had uncovered a hide-out of Slinger Geer's gang. How swiftly the tables had turned since that treacherous ambush at the cavalry crossing!

And what—when old Kicking Horse discovered that his favorite nephew was dead or a prisoner—would be the warlike chief's reaction to the cold treachery of white men? Not many years before, Kicking Horse, wearing war paint, had led his braves against the troops, following the signals of such mighty chiefs as Crazy Horse and Two Moons. In twenty years the old man had learned to adapt himself to military law so that he might become a free man. But under his present mildness still lay the strong temper of a fighter. The old chief might consider the outrage upon his

nephew as a blow to his pride and his clan, assemble his braves, pound the war drum, paint for a foray against all whites.

Not long before, Geronimo, oppressed by what he considered affronts to his Apaches, had jumped his reservation in the Southwest. And only a short time before that, the Cheyennes had ridden through five lines of troops, flying from their hated reservation in Oklahoma to their native Northwestern home from which they had been summarily removed by a harsh and undiplomatic order.

"I've got to reach the chief before he orders out his men," Dan whispered, crouching in a thicket, gripping the nostrils of the bay so that by its whinny it wouldn't reveal the hiding place to Shadock's riders.

His father had warned Dan, when he took the river-scout job, of another danger in handling the delicate range situation that had arisen with the removal of the troops. Indians, in their tribal dealings, were not greatly different than whites. They had their politicians, their schemers, who were always seeking to undermine the influential leaders.

A feud ran between the old chief and his chief medicine man, a wizened, shrewd-eyed old man known as Father Coyote. He was called this because the Stone House Indians believed the coyote the wisest and most treacherous of all animals. Because some of the older warriors resented being placed on a reservation, the Coyote had built up a feud against Kicking Horse. And there were hotheaded young braves, too, who longed for the chance to take scalps as had their fathers. For the old law ran that greatest honor came to warriors from three deeds: the stealing of an enemy's horses, the leading of a successful war party, or taking a foeman's scalp in single combat. Now—under paleface law—all these chances had been taken from ambitious braves. Instead they were told to plow the land, raise hay, fatten cattle. They must never kill nor steal. And the clever Coyote had gained great power because a wise chief had, until now, supported the white man's laws.

As the sun rose in the western sky, Dan sought to escape by crossing the river. But he drew a bullet from the opposite bank. And knew that Duff had sent a man across to patrol the western shore. Dan might have chanced a fight. But though he had jerked a six-gun from Haze Parr's hand, the gun carried only three live loads in the cylinder.

Dan carried no spare ammunition because Uncle Joe had taken away his gun belt down at Cavalry Crossing. So he slipped up the river, hiding in shadows of the timber, leading the tired bay pony that offered him his sole chance for escape if he found a way open.

Reaching another open strip of ground where a flood from the hills had cut away the brush and converted the land into a bog, Dan paused to seek safe footing through the miry ground. As he stood in the brush, he heard the sounds of a struggle in a low spot of ground. He glanced that way and his gray eyes widened.

There he saw the big roan longhorn he had driven across the river just before daybreak. It had become bogged down. Looking on past it to high ground, Dan saw fresh trails in the mud where a large bunch of cattle had marched down toward the river.

The range sign indicated the roan had joined up with a band of runaways from the UO herd, filed down toward the stream with them, be-

come mired in the swamp. For the rawboned animal was hip-deep and almost helpless in the muck.

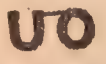
Dan tied up his horse, intending to slip out and inspect the roan. He wanted also to study the trail of the main herd. The prints of shod horses might be there, indicating that rustlers had been following the cattle.

As he stepped from the brush, four riders came jogging down the trail. Dan dropped to the ground, lay motionless in the saw-edged swamp grass. For he saw that Duff Shadock and Uncle Joe were leading and Red Hoss Rogan and Butcher Knife Badger following. All carried rifles across their saddle forks.

The four reined in abruptly at sight of the struggling roan. Dan lay so near them he could hear their loud talk.

"I'm danged!" roared Uncle Joe. "This proves you told the truth, Duff. Danged if that roan don't carry my UO brand, freshly burned into an Injun Snake brand! I'm shore glad yuh forced me to come with yuh. Now this proves it was Injuns an' not whites that stampeded my cattle. The stolen stuff passed here. The roan got bogged down—"

Dan's heart chilled. He pictured the two brands in his mind, saw that the UO could be quickly, although crudely, ironed into a Snake. With his forefinger he traced the outline in the soft earth. Uncle Joe's mark was burned in this fashion:



By adding two upper loops it became the Snake, which was branded in this way on all the Indian cattle:

Duff laughed harshly. "Too bad that Sally didn't believe me when I swore Dan Burke had turned renygade and was out to kill white cowboys like Lon Eaves and Tom Lyons and steal cattle from her own granddad."

Uncle Joe said sadly, "No. She acted plumb locoed. She slipped off that bay while you was tryin' to shoot Dan in the gulch. She jumped on that gray—the fastest hoss in my string—and away she headed afore we could stop her. Gosh knows whar she went. She might have gone to camp. Or she might have gone—"

Duff growled: "She might have ridden to tell old Tip Burke about the trouble his son was in. And, if she does, that ol' rannihan will come ridin' with half the reservation Injuns at his heels."

Uncle Joe said grimly: "You threw a gun on me, forced me to come with yuh while yuh run down Dan. Yuh figured yuh might show me, too, the trail of stolen cattle. Waal—you've *showed* me. Soon as I can do it, I'll send a wire to the war department, ask them to put the soldiers back at Fort Gunlock. These thievin' Injuns ain't fit to be trusted."

Uncle Joe, swinging off his horse, stumped angrily toward the quaking edge of the bog. Shadock, Rogan, and Badger watched the old man and grinned as he squatted on his lean haunches, inspecting the blotched brand on his suffering roan longhorn.

Craang! Like a rattle of mountain thunder, guns barked from timber fringing the river.

Red Hoss Rogan wheeled his pony and fled toward the hills. Duff Shadock jumped his cayuse into the brush while Butcher Knife Badger, clinging to his saddlehorn, followed

Red Hoss. The three, as far as Dan could judge, ran like scared coyotes.

A terrific yell rang out after the volley of gunfire. Dan felt a shiver run up his spine. He recognized the war whoop of the Stone House Indians.

Straight from the timber the warriors charged, lean figures, half naked on their shaggy ponies, feathers fluttering from their coarse black hair, stripes of black-and-white paint masking their faces.

An old man with a pair of buffalo horns strapped to his head flourished a lance from which rattled a half dozen dried and painted scalps. A half dozen red riders obeyed his signals.

Dan recognized the leader as the Coyote, chief medicine man on the reservation, rival for supremacy in the band.

Duff Shadock hadn't sent a rider to patrol the western bank of the river. Red scouts had fired on Dan. The Coyote's men were on the warpath.

Uncle Joe, leaping up on his boots, reached for his gun as the warriors galloped toward him. Then the old man's hand fell away helplessly. His holster was empty. Duff Shadock had earlier disarmed him.

"He can't fight," Dan groaned. "Can't even save a bullet for his own head."

For he pictured the dread rites that Coyote might, in his rage, inflict upon white captives. His own father had once stood against a torture post with flames licking at his feet. To the end of his life, old Tip would limp. Only the intervention of Kicking Horse had saved old Burke then.

Uncle Joe must have understood that death was upon him. He saw there was no chance of retreat. He was old. The bog barred escape to one flank. Indians were riding swiftly across the other.

So this grizzled veteran of the Texas Trail stood up like a soldier on parade. He faced the main band of the Indians as they swept toward him, howling wolfish yells, obeying the signals from the war lance of their medicine chief.

Indians respected bravery. They didn't ride down this gallant old cattleman. They preferred to take him alive, test out his courage in their own savage fashion. They drew tight the single thongs of their war bridles, rode out to right or left so their scampering war ponies would not crush Uncle Joe into the earth.

And that move gave Dan Burke his opportunity. He held a six-gun that carried but three live loads. He had saved those cartridges for the hour of need, that black moment when he might encounter a hostile gunman in the river thickets.

Dan leaped from cover. He swung his gun. It roared. Two bullets cracked like whips above the buffalo-horn headdress that the Coyote had strapped to his head.

The sudden appearance of Dan startled Coyote and his whooping followers. The snap of bullets further alarmed the medicine chief. He preferred to strike safely from ambush, weave his plots in a warm camp. He was not of the brave type of Kicking Horse, who lowered his lance in battle and charged headlong against one or a hundred men.

Leaping around the shaking edge of the bog toward Uncle Joe's side, Dan recalled that the Indians also called their old chief White Brave. For Indians in war followed a different custom than white soldiers. They often ran away to live and

fight another day. Not that they were cowards but they didn't believe in taking too many chances with odds against them. The exceptional warrior who ran undue risks was therefore called White Brave. And in the Indian mind, this was not considered complimentary at all.

Reaching the side of Uncle Joe, Dan raised his left hand, palm outward in the peace sign. He held his smoking gun now with barrel pointing toward the earth. There was a sinking feeling in his breast, too, for he knew his Colt now held but one live load. But he faced the Indians calmly, wearing what was called on the frontier a poker face.

He must match wits with the wise old medicine man who had checked his painted pony only a few yards from the two whites.

Coyote showed his snags of teeth in a grin. But it was mirthless, not friendly. Here stood the paleface friend of Kicking Horse. And the old cattleman who was *not* the chief's friend. They faced death, shoulder to shoulder. Palefaces, the Coyote apparently thought, were strange. No Stone House warrior would have jumped from safe cover to aid an enemy.

In the painted crew that followed Coyote, Dan recognized two young warriors who were fast friends of Bad Ax. That restored his hope that he might persuade the Coyote to conduct white prisoners to the chief rather than to the torture post.

Coyote leaned on the front of his saddle, watching Dan with shrewd gaze. This old man never spoke English. But Dan felt sure he understood it. However the river scout resorted to the universal sign talk of the Indians which all understood. He signed that his heart was good toward Indians, that he was a friend of Kicking Horse, that he desired safe conduct to the tribe's camp for himself and this gray-haired old man who was also his friend.

Coyote shrugged his bare and scrawny shoulders. He shook his head. That was *no.* In any language.

Then Dan asked him why he had staged this ambush which would surely bring the horse soldiers back to the reservation if it succeeded, again convert all the Indians into humble prisoners of war, stripped of their slow elk, their name for cattle.

The Coyote raised a long and skinny arm, pointed down the river. And Dan, turning to follow the direction, saw a thin streamer of smoke rising above the distant summit of War Butte. In days long past of war, Indians had signaled from that landmark. Today they had again resorted to their savage arts.

Dan nodded, understanding that Pretty Fox and Shut Eye hadn't retreated at dawn. They had hidden out, watched the fight on the beach. Then they had climbed the butte, built a smoke of green grass to alarm their people.

Dan smiled. It would be easy to explain why the red scouts had climbed the butte. He signed that all was good, that the scouts were his friends, that they had been with him in a fight with white men whose hearts were bad.

The Coyote sneered. He sat up stiffly on his pony, kicked the shaggy little beast in the ribs. He rode boldly toward Dan. The latter heard the harsh breathing of old Joe, and the cattleman's whisper.

"I reckon we're all *through* now."

The Coyote didn't fling his lance, drive the sharp point into the breast of either of the defiant cattlemen. He halted his pony. He held up

his right hand and he made the sign of the snake with the forked tongue. Which, among his band, was the sign that Dan had *lied*, that all was *not well* with Pretty Fox, Shut Eye, and Bad Ax. Then the Coyote spoke the name of the chief's nephew in good English. And he grunted two words.

"*Him dead!*"

So Shut Eye and Pretty Fox, seeing their friend fall from his pony on the beach, believed their comrade was dead. That accounted for the presence of Bad Ax's mates in this war party. They had ridden forth to take scalps in revenge.

Uncle Joe whispered again: "Boy—if you got any bullets in that gun—*start throwin' 'em.* But . . . but save a couple fer me an' you."

Dan wouldn't break Uncle Joe's nerve by informing him that the gun held only one bullet.

The Coyote sat boldly upon his pony but a few feet away. With five warriors near, he feared nothing from two whites. A rifle rested across the old man's knees.

Dan whispered sharply to Uncle Joe. "When I shoot—you hit the ground! Otherwise they may stick yore ornery carcass full of their lances!"

"You goin' to shoot that grinnin' ol' Injun?"

"No!"

"Why not? The beef-stealin' ol' feather duster shore deserves a bullet."

Dan said: "For once in yore life, believe me when I tell yuh that I know Injuns an' you don't. If you had believed me early this mornin', a lot of this trouble wouldn't have happened."

"Yuh can't git past that UO brand on that roan burned into a Snake mark. They want to kill us so we can't find the beef they run off. Or send to the soldiers fer help. They'll butcher us up an' hide us in the river."

Dan jeered. "White men like Shadock and Butcher Knife, who left you in the pinch will probably send for help. They'd need about a full squadron of the Fifty-first to help 'em steal cow grass from Kickin' Hoss."

Angered by Uncle Joe's lack of trust, Dan lunged toward the pony of the medicine chief. As he leaped in he flipped up his gun. He fired the last load. The blaze of burning powder, the bellow of the weapon, startled the pony.

The bullet, tearing past the Coyote's ear, also alarmed the medicine man. He strove to regain balance as his pony began to pitch. But Dan leaped in, aided by the furious lunges of the horse. He seized the Coyote's right leg and rudely jerked him to the ground.

The rifle clattered as the old man fell.

Dan seized it, raced the lever, lined the barrel on the yelping red men who swung their ponies to charge him.

Whang! The Winchester barked its warning. They knew that this river scout was a dead shot. They were not *White Brave.* They veered away from the smoking barrel, riding for the brush where they could take counsel.

The Coyote lay sprawled on the soft earth, never making a hostile move. He knew that he was the young white's prisoner. He preferred to lie quietly and think rather than draw a bullet that would end forever his dream of becoming chief.

Uncle Joe choked out: "Dan—what'll I do now?"

"Stay in hidin'."

Dan dared not take his eyes off the gloomy brush that hid the In-

dians. He couldn't see where Uncle Joe had jumped when he charged the medicine man.

Uncle Joe's plaintive answer amazed him. For Uncle Joe whimpered.

"Dan—I jumped so high and wide I landed squar in this bog alongside my damn misbranded roan. The mud's up to my *neck*, in my eyes an' mouth. An' if this fool critter gits a laig loose, it's apt to kick off my head. Dan—I'd ruther chance an Injun arrer than stay here an' smother."

But Uncle Joe was saved from that sort of death. For ponies appeared, coming up the dim trail from the river. There was a flash of scarlet and blue, and yellow under the slanting rays of the western sun.

Into the open jogged majestic old Kicking Horse in the savage regalia of war. Black-and-white paint streaked his hatchetlike face. The eagle-feather train of his war bonnet swept almost to the ground on both sides of the sleek buckskin pony that he rode. High from his huge wooden stirrup rose his red lance. And on his naked left arm the chief wore the round shield of buffalo hide upon which was painted his totem sign of the kicking horse.

At the heels of the buckskin came other warriors, silent and grim-faced, all in their paint, guns across their saddles, feathers stuck in their greased, upstanding scalp locks.

Dan Burke groaned. The arrival of the old chief might mean the saving of his life. But the paint that Kicking Horse wore signified that he believed, like the Coyote, that white men had killed his favorite nephew. And that, therefore, to avenge his honor and that of his family, he had formed his band and jumped the reservation to lay waste the Gunlock Valley.

Then—as Dan stood up and rested the Coyote's rifle across his left arm—a horseman in buckskin spurred away from the file of silent warriors. He rode awkwardly, and with good reason, for a peg of wood served as his right foot.

"Son!" the rider shouted. "Son—I'm glad you're alive! I come out with the chief. After that brave little gal rode to warn us of all the dirty work goin' on."

Dan's heart glowed. So Sally had carried word of his danger to the fort. The chief had painted to ride against young Dan's enemies. So the young river scout believed until his father shook his head sadly and answered his eager questions.

"The chief," old Tip Burke explained sorrowfully, "will save the lives of white men he considers his friends. But he's out to kill *all the rest.*"

"Why?"

"The signal came that white men had killed his nephew. Yuh can still see the smoke on War Butte."

Dan Burke spoke between his teeth. "That signal's *wrong*. Bad Ax *lives*. But he's a prisoner. Held by Slinger Geer's gang. And I can *prove* it."

Old Tip growled: "Talk *danged fast* then. Kickin' Hoss is mad as a bald-faced hornet."

CHAPTER VI.

DEADLINE ON WAR.

DAN BURKE talked as swiftly as he could in the difficult Stone House tongue which was similar to the guttural lingo of the fierce Comanches, part of the same tribal strain. His father, an expert interpreter for many years, aided him. While still as a statue on his buck-

skin war horse, the old chief listened with narrowed eyes, impassive face.

And while Dan pleaded for the lives of innocent whites and explained his belief that men with bad hearts had launched a plot to arouse Indian rage and so place the chief's band again under military control, young warriors hauled old Joe from the bog. And with their lariats and stout ponies, also dragged out the suffering roan.

Uncle Joe sputtered a question as to the safety of Sally.

Old Tip answered coldly: "She's safe in the Stone House camp. Guarded by warriors."

"*Injuns* guardin' my leetle gal? Damn it—if anything happens to her—"

Old Tip thrust out his whiskered chin, answered savagely. "You blitherin' ol' goat! Sally's safer in the Injun camp than she was around that wolf-eyed Duff Shadock."

Though his heart yearned for further word of Sally's well being, Dan Burke wasted no time asking for information. He put duty before love for the yellow-haired girl. He talked to check the red cloud of war gathered here on the Gunlock to storm through a peaceful cattle country.

The Coyote interrupted him once, jabbering excitedly while Kicking Horse listened in stony silence. When the Coyote's shrill voice had died away, Kicking Horse flicked his trigger finger. Two young men sprang forward with quirts. They whipped the Coyote off toward the river as though he were a dog. The chief spoke a few grim words in the Stone House tongue.

Old Tip interpreted: "He told the Coyote to go shave his scalp lock off. Work with the squaws. He says any warrior who would let a paleface pull him off his hoss and take away his gun ain't fitten fer nuthin' 'cept choppin' wood an' carrying water. Yeah—" Tip smiled. "Though yuh may lose out, Dan, what yuh did to the Coyote busted *him* up fer keeps among these Injuns."

Now came the showdown, with Dan swearing that he possessed proof that Bad Ax lived but was held prisoner. From his pocket he drew the greasewood stump with the bit of red calico tied to it. And he also exhibited the tuft of white wool torn from the chaps of a white man.

The chief looked at the red calico. Uncle Joe Ord stared at the tuft of white wool. Earlier that day Uncle Joe had hesitated to believe Dan's account of the ambush, even though the discovery of the bit of goatskin had supported Dan's story of two men hiding in the thicket where he had killed Lon Eaves.

Now here sat a red warrior, certain that his favorite nephew had been murdered by whites. If Kicking Horse refused to believe the evidence of the calico rag that Bad Ax still lived, then Dan Burke's fight was lost. True—*he* might live, but many of his cowboy friends would die before cavalry bugles rang out along the Gunlock. And if such occurred, life would be bitter to Dan.

The chief took the calico rag. Not a muscle of his face moved as he examined it. Then, sternly, he looked at Dan. He spoke so swiftly the river scout could not follow. When he had ended, Kicking Horse touched first his breast, then his lips with his trigger finger.

Old Tip Burke interpreted.

"The chief has put it up to you, Dan," he explained. "White men killed or stole his nephew while the boy was with you. So—you must return the boy. Dead or alive.

Since he knows you are his friend, he will give you until daybreak to do it."

Daybreak! So that now became the deadline for peace or war on Gunlock River. And the crucial test was put up to young Dan Burke.

"The chief thinks Bad Ax is dead? Even when I tell about findin' the calico?" Dan asked. "He doesn't believe me?"

"He does believe you. He would believe you even if you hadn't found anything. For he knows you are his friend. That is why he gives you a man's chance to find his nephew and save yore white friends from a heap of trouble."

Dan bowed his head. A red man had trusted him with but a flimsy calico rag as evidence. White men down by the river, men like Uncle Joe, hadn't—even though evidence was far stronger.

Uncle Joe whispered: "Dan—I see it all now. I was a fool. Duff Shadock—he's mixed up in all this. He had me convinced all Injuns were thieves and killers. He showed me this trail of stolen cattle. And this roan left so conveniently in a bog with my blotched brand in plain sight. Course, the white rustlers burned that brand from a UO into a Snake. To make things blacker against the Injuns."

"Shadock!" Dan blazed out. "I've had Slinger Geer in mind all along as the chief plotter. But Slinger's jest a rustler. A smart mind has been behind all this clever plannin'. I'll run down Shadock. He knows where that Injun boy is held prisoner. I'll return Bad Ax to the chief's camp by dawn. Or—by that same hour, I'll be cold meat for plantin' in the ground."

They furnished him with arms, buckled a belt around his waist, slung another filled with .30-30 ammunition, bandolier fashion, over his shoulder. Then they thrust a rifle into the sheath on his saddle.

Mounted on the bay, Dan Burke rode again up Gunlock River while the sun hurried toward the western divide and the time shortened toward red war.

He faced the lone fight. That was the bargain the chief had drawn up according to his savage code of fairness which, after all, was entirely square. Dan Burke had lost his nephew. Therefore Dan Burke must find that nephew within a given period or many of his friends would die.

Dan headed up the Gunlock toward a resort operated on the east bank just across from the fort. It was called the Last Chance, and the owner was a drawling giant known as Mojave Jack.

With a full regiment of cavalry in the post, paid off each month with several thousands of dollars, Mojave Jack had grown wealthy on troopers' earnings. But, with the abandonment of the fort, hard times had descended swiftly upon the frontier dive operator. However the place was a port of call. And Dan hoped to strike word there of the passing of Duff Shadock.

Dusk was blotting out landmarks when he rode down toward the rambling log structure of the Last Chance, built on high ground a few yards above the whispering river. Across the stream Dan saw the flicker of firelight in the Indian camp located near the adobe buildings of Fort Gunlock. His heart leaped at the sight. There—if his father spoke the truth and Tip had never been known to lie—a gallant yellow-haired girl rested in safety, guarded by faithful warriors of the old chief.

Dan tied his bay in the brush. He dared not leave the pony at the

hitch rack in front of the Last Chance. If some man of Shadock's rode up while he was inside, word would be passed immediately of Dan's whereabouts, and he would be trapped.

He tested out the Colt he had taken from Haze Parr. The action proved smooth and fast. He filled the cylinders with fresh loads for luck, then thrust the long gun back into its oiled holster. So, set for war, Dan eased through the swinging shuttered doorway of the Last Chance and into the long room that for many years had echoed to the shouts and laughter of merry troopers spending their pay.

Oil lamps, suspended from the rafters, illuminated the bar, outlined its green-topped card tables, the battered boards along one wall where at times men had stood two-deep to reach for bottles.

Now only three sad-eyed gamblers lounged in their chairs back of the poker and faro tables. And Mojave Jack, a tall, dark man with cold eyes and smoothly shaven face, stood behind the bar polishing a glass. Jack wore a vest with green satin front and blue forget-me-nots painted upon it. It was a three-button affair, but open except for the button just above Jack's waistband.

MOJAVE JACK

Jack gazed listlessly toward the dollar that Dan rang upon the boards. Then he pushed the coin back to the owner.

"Drink on me," he growled. "Since the troops moved out, I'm losin' hundreds of dollars every day. So—what's a cowpoke's lone dollar to me?"

Dan answered slowly: "I jest dropped by to pick up the news. Who's crossed the river lately? Heard talk of a big UO stampede. Thought mebbe some of my friends might have stopped in—"

There was a dirty mirror behind the bar. And suddenly it revealed to Dan a form rising from behind a stack of beer kegs in the far corner of the long room.

That man was Duff Shadock. Grinning, he lined his gun on Dan's back.

"Don't turn," he cautioned. "Or make ary move. You come huntin' fer friends. Well—we're *here. Waitin' fer you.*"

Then in the mirror Dan saw Red Hoss Rogan and Butcher Knife Badger step swiftly from the dark areaway that led toward the rear entrance. Red Hoss marched straight toward Dan. Butcher Knife slouched over and leaned against the rear end of the bar.

Behind the boards, Mojave Jack stood impassive as any Indian. There wasn't a sign of alarm or surprise in his face as he watched three men stalk Dan Burke. But carefully Jack kept his hands in full sight.

Then Dan Burke knew that the three men alone hadn't trapped him. Mojave Jack was also in on the deal. Otherwise the man would have shown amazement at the swift flare-up of trouble. Also Duff Shadock and his men had been carefully hidden out.

Since Mojave Jack stood the nearest to him of the enemy, although behind a bar, Dan's sole hope lay in attack on the dive owner. If he stood here with hands up, they'd show small mercy once Red Hoss had taken away his gun.

The mirror revealed also that by reaching Mojave Jack, he might twist the man around and so block Duff Shadock's line of fire. Every move to be made flashed through Dan's mind as he stood there, apparently calm, but hearing the *thud—thud—thud* of boots as Red Hoss sauntered up the room to take away his gun.

The room was silent as an undertaker's parlor now. Death hung over it. The pallid-faced gamblers, apparently not part of this gun trap, showed their wisdom by slipping from their chairs and taking shelter behind their tables.

So the situation stood for the moment as though burned in hard lines under the glare of the lights. Dan Burke lounged against the bar, hands resting on the wet boards. Duff Shadock, across the room, leaned against the wall, gun directed at Dan's back. Red Hoss stomped on toward the intended victim. Butcher Knife, down the long bar, lazed against its end. And Mojave Jack picked up a glass and began to wipe it off with his soiled bar rag. Thus indicating—but too late—that he was not involved in this little difficulty.

Dan tensed his body so slowly and easily that the movement didn't alarm Duff Shadock. He counted, too, on the man's vigilance relaxing. After all, three men were here to aid Duff, and he had the deadwood on Dakota Dan Burke. No reason therefore to tire his arm by rigidly lining a heavy Colt's revolver.

Duff Shadock *slightly* relaxed his right arm.

Dan Burke saw that merest flicker of motion in the dirty bar mirror.

Pressing his left palm solidly down upon the bar, Dan vaulted over the boards. They hadn't expected that. As Dan's sinewy form rose in the air, legs swinging over the bar, Duff Shadock leaped away from the wall, gun roaring.

Red Hoss Rogan, startled, almost fell over his spurs in his hurry to line artillery.

Butcher Knife Badger came to life with a hoarse and amazed curse. He thumbed his Colt hammer. A bullet ripped a furrow the length of the Last Chance Bar.

Dan Burke's heels crashed down on the floor boards between bar and back counter. Glass crashed as Mojave Jack dropped the pony glass and bar towel and buried his white hand inside his fancy-fronted vest.

The moment Jack's hand came again into sight, Dan Burke knew why Jack only fastened the lowest of three vest buttons. For Jack gripped a double-barreled derringer, a murderous gun at close quarters, throwing a larger slug than a Colt. And a vest, mostly open in the front, always aided Jack in the quick draw.

But *not this evening.*

Dan Burke, dropping behind the bar, crooked his knees. His head was below the level of the boards. For the moment he was protected from the bullets of Shadock and his killers.

With a lunge he struck Mojave Jack just below the knees. The big man reeled down the bar, striving to fire on Dan with the derringer as he fought to regain balance.

With the leap of a mountain lion,

Dan leaped upon Jack. Now he had cleared his six-gun. He slashed out savagely. The front sight knocked the derringer from the hand of Mojave Jack. The weapon was cocked. It roared with deafening sound as it struck the floor.

Flinging his left arm about Mojave Jack's waist, Dan hugged the dive owner tightly to his side. He half dragged Jack toward the rear end of the bar. Jack's writhing frame protected him for the moment from the blazing guns of Duff Shadock and Red Hoss Rogan.

Butcher Knife Badger slid into the space between bar and counter at the rear of the room. There was an eager grin upon his face, a rising gun in his hand. He believed that he had the cold drop upon Dan Burke.

With Mojave Jack floundering like a fish against his left ribs, Dan Burke pitched his gun forward. He fired on Butcher Knife. From the start he had known he must open up the line of escape through the rear of the saloon. And Butcher Knife guarded that avenue.

Butcher Knife Badger went down in a kicking heap. Knocked there by a gun that had been jerked from the hand of a saddle mate—Haze Parr—who this moment lay in a cut gulch up under War Butte.

Dan Burke released his clutch on the struggling body of Mojave Jack. Bending his head below bar level, he darted down the narrow alley, stepped over the still struggling form of Butcher Knife.

He dodged into the dark passage that led to the rear door. They fired on him as he exposed his lean body briefly during the leap into the shadows—but missed. He flung out his left hand, seized a hook that protruded from the wall, pulled his sinewy frame up snugly against the logs.

The hook held a burden, too. He held to it for support while he filled his lungs, steadied his gun hand. Duff and Red Hoss believed that Dan had stopped their lead. They started toward the darkness that now hid him.

Whirling, he blazed a bullet. Red Hoss yelped and dropped to the floor. Duff followed suit.

Now shouts rang out in the darkness. Men were mustering from shacks located in the timber around the dive, part of the Last Chance gang of bouncers.

Dan Burke grinned grimly. At least he had located Duff Shadock. He leaped out the rear door. He bore with him the burden that had hung from the hook and which he had involuntarily grasped.

It wasn't until he had dodged into the brush and raced back to where the bay was tied that he looked upon this strange burden. Then he gasped in surprise.

The burden was a pair of white Angora goatskin chaps. Inside the leather belt was written in ink the name of Mojave Jack. But in the trailing fringe, where the chaps struck a man's insteps, there were patches where the wool had been torn away.

These were the chaps that Slinger Geer had worn down at Cavalry Crossing. But they belonged to Mojave Jack. Therefore *Jack must be* Slinger Geer.

Dan Burke scowled. "That couldn't be. I saw Slinger's face. He was wearin' a patch over his right eye. And red whiskers on his chops. While Jack—he's dark an' smooth-shaven."

But the moment Mojave Jack discovered that his chaps were missing, he might quit the country. He

must be forced to reveal all he knew about Slinger Geer, rustler king. And that information in turn might lead to the hiding place of Bad Ax.

It all summed up that Dakota Dan Burke must re-enter a joint from which he had just barely escaped with his life.

He looked toward the fires across the river where his Sally reposed, guarded by warriors. He nodded his head as though in farewell. Then, drawing his rifle from its sheath, he gave the bay a pat on the head, and turned back toward the Last Chance.

CHAPTER VII.

UNMASKED.

BUT now the dive buzzed like a nest of angry hornets. Riders, galloping up, slid from their saddles and tied their ponies to the hitch rack. They raced into the place, spurs ringing on the rough planks of the front porch. They appeared to spring from all sides of the clearing, coming from hide-outs in the thick brush. Dan Burke, narrow-eyed, counted at least a dozen men.

He understood at once that he couldn't boldly invade the barroom. They'd shoot him down without mercy or warning. And, though he might die bravely, that act wouldn't restrain old Kicking Horse from starting red war at daybreak.

Dan returned to his pony, untied it and led the animal farther back into thick timber where he hoped it would escape the searching eyes of Mojave Jack's gang. Then the river scout slipped down through the brush toward the crossing to ascertain the number of men on guard.

One wise move he made before he departed. He pulled off his leather chaps, hung them on his saddlehorn. Then he donned the pair of white goatskin he had nabbed from Jack's rear hallway. If any scout accosted him in the gloom, those white chaps would show up quite plainly and act as a partial disguise. For all these men undoubtedly had seen Jack—or Slinger Geer—wearing them.

Convinced that Mojave Jack had played the double rôle of dive owner and rustler chief, Dan still pondered the question of appearance in the two men. The rustler wore a black patch over his right eye and red whiskers upon his face. Mojave Jack possessed two good eyes, was smoothly shaven and dark-haired. It didn't fit in.

Hidden under a mud bank, Dan saw the forms of two horsemen outlined against the gleaming background of the hurrying river. Across the stream, fires still smoked in the Indian camp, but apparently the sound of gunfire at Jack's place had not alarmed the Indians. This amazed Dan until he reflected that the Indians had often heard celebrating cowboys shooting up the Last Chance in the free old days when thousands of dollars were sliding over the bar.

Thousands of dollars—there appeared another motive for the return of troops. Mojave Jack had mourned the hard times that had come with the departure of the Fifty-first Cavalry. It would be to the man's interest to sit in on any plot to bring back the military to the fort. So, boldly revealed at last in Dan's mind, stood the whole dark background of the plot, based on greed, that threatened to cause an Indian outbreak. Duff Shadock desired Indian grass. Mojave Jack wished for soldiers' pay. If Slinger Geer existed as a third man, he then depended upon the cattlemen and

the dive owner to clear his rustler trail to the Buzzard Roost country. By arousing the fury of Uncle Joe, the powerful cattleman, playing on his ignorance and mistrust of Indians, their plot would succeed.

"Unless I dig up young Bad Ax —and deliver him across the river by *daybreak*," Dan whispered.

He suspected that since the Last Chance was headquarters for Shadock and Mojave Jack, they would hold the young Indian prisoner somewhere about the rambling place. That is—if they hadn't killed the boy and thrown his body into the river. But if Bad Ax lived, where were they holding him as prisoner? And how could the Last Chance be searched with armed riders thronging all around it and guarding all the trails?

Like any wise warrior, Dan planned first to open the line of retreat across the river. He slipped back to where a dozen ponies were tied to the hitch rack.

He freed a nervous pony, turned it so that its nose pointed up the eastern trail. Then he jerked his six-gun, crashed two roaring shots past the pony's head. And at the same time slapped the beast on its quivering hips with the flat of his rifle stock.

With a bawl of fright, the pony bolted up the trail. Ponies at the rail, startled by the roaring gun, lunged back on their tie ropes. Two, tied by leather reins, succeeded in breaking away and following the stampeding cayuse.

Men crowded out the front door of the Last Chance at sound of the gunfire. They rushed down the front steps. They heard the thunder of hoofs of horses pounding away. Guns flashed in the darkness.

Dan Burke leaped around the corner of the Last Chance, crouched in the shadows, listening to the commotion. He grinned, too, when he heard the loud voice of Duff Shadock bellowing his name. And his smile widened when the two river guards, rolling their spurs, tore past him and rushed up the trail in pursuit of the runaway horses.

For Duff's shouts informed Dan that the Last Chance gang believed that Dan Burke was riding the stampeding pony. In the few moments granted him by the turn of men's attention to the eastern trail, Dan prowled around the Last Chance seeking any possible entrance so that he might search for sign of Bad Ax.

The Last Chance stood on a high log foundation to prevent water from river floods entering the main bar. This space beneath the building was walled in with slabs of log, and, in ordinary times, served as the cellar where Mojave Jack kept his spare stock of goods. Here and there were small windows built for ventilation.

Silence descended upon the Last Chance. Men stalked back into the bar after sending several riders to aid the river guards in pursuing the supposed fugitive. Dan lay crouched not far from a dusty window in the lower section of the building.

He could see far away the dull-red glow of the Indian fires. He heard coyotes yelping on some far-away ridge. And then—so near his ear that it startled him—Dan heard the hoot of an owl. But the bird wasn't in the timber. For the nearest trees were fifty yards away.

This owl was in the Last Chance cellar. And it *wasn't* an owl. That was a signal often used by Indian scouts. The young warriors, riding with Dan to seek a rustlers' hide-

out, had signaled back and forth with similar hoots.

The owl then was *Bad Ax*. The Indian was held prisoner in the gloomy cellar of the Last Chance. And hearing the excited men shout Dan Burke's name, the Indian had used this familiar signal in hope that his white friend would hear it.

Dan examined the window. It was large enough to admit a man's body if the two panes were broken out. He grasped his six-gun around the cylinder, wrapped the tail of his shirt around fist and gun stock. Then, swiftly, he hammered out the glass. That completed, he lay silent a moment, fearing the tinkle of glass might have attracted hostile attention.

He heard harsh breathing inside the cellar room. He whispered:

"Bad Ax! Window open. You come out! Dan Burke—he talk to you."

The answer came in the broken talk of Bad Ax.

"No can move. Heap hogtied! Hurt bad, too, in left arm!"

Dan pondered a moment. If he climbed down into the dark dungeon, rambling scouts might discover the broken window, trap him. However the chance must be taken. For they had tied up the Indian. And he was wounded to boot, in the left arm.

Dan thrust his body through the broken window, swung down into the cellar, crouched on his haunches listening. Then he struck a match. Its flare revealed the Indian boy, tied up like a beef for branding, in a corner of the room. A sodden bandage was knotted around Bad Ax's upper left arm. But his dark eyes gleamed as Dan bent over him, knife slashing at cutting ropes.

"You my friend!" whispered Bad Ax. "I know you come. I hear plenty holler yore name. So—I hoot all same owl bird."

After freeing the Indian, Dan attempted to aid him to freedom through the window. But the wounded left arm had sapped Bad Ax's strength and he had lain so long in his ropes that his legs were stiff and almost useless.

"We'll have to wait until yuh git rested," Dan said. "Then we'll try it again."

Time slipped past as the two rested there in the cellar. Bad Ax explained how he had tied the calico rag to the greasewood stump, hoping a friend would discover it later. He said also that Tom Lyons had died long before the capture down on the river, that he had seen a bullet hole in the cowboy's back. Apparently the puncher had been killed by the rustlers who jumped the UO herd, ambushed as he rode in pursuit. And then the Indian knife had been thrust into his body later when Geer and his ambushers galloped away from the fight at Cavalry Crossing.

A flare of light startled the two friends. It came from above. The Indian lad rolled into a corner. Dan Burke crouched against the wall, gun drawn. For he saw Mojave Jack backing down the flight of steps that led from the trapdoor in the bar floor into the cellar. Jack carried a lantern. He held it above his head as he paused to speak a few words to friends along the bar.

"I'll bump off the Injun," Jack said. "Figured until now we might hold him prisoner an' strike some sort of deal with Kickin' Hoss fer his return. But since yuh say, Duff, that they've sent riders to round up the bunch we stole from the UO, we better mount and scatter."

Then Dan heard the reply of Duff Shadock and it chilled his heart.

For Shadock said: "A scout told me the Ord gal is over in the Injun camp. I'll meet yuh there, Jack. An' then we'll all head fer Idyho—"

Jack laughed and said: "You was always a fool fer the women, Duff. If yuh hadn't got sweet on that gal, mebbe this thing of bringin' back troops would 'a' worked out. Well—it'll sort of ease my feelin' to knock in the head of that Injun kid."

He backed down the steps, lowering the trapdoor as he descended. He placed his lantern on the lowest step, turned around. That moment Dan Burke leaped upon him, gun swinging. The river scout dared not fire a shot. That would attract Shadock and his gang. He swung to daze Mojave Jack before he could give the alarm.

Jack cursed, resisted Dan's attack. And in the lantern light a knife flashed, descending toward Dan's throat. The scout thrust up an arm, checked the sweep of Jack's stout arm. Thus diverted, the blade sank into the breast of its owner just below his throat. And Mojave Jack went limp as a wet sack of flour in Dan's arms.

Dan rested the quivering body on the floor. Mojave Jack opened his eyes before he died. He looked up into Dan's face.

"Mebbe I *had* it comin'," he whispered, "but it was Duff who was the head push."

"You were Slinger Geer? But yore black hair—good eyes?"

Jack grinned, answered feebly: "Look in the pocket of them chaps yo're wearin'." Then his eyes rolled back and glazed over.

In the pocket Dan found a portion of the Angora goatskin which had been dyed red and fashioned to mask the lower half of a man's face. That explained Slinger Geer's red whiskers. There was an eye patch which cleared up the rest of the rustler's disguise.

But now Dan Burke worked feverishly, for Duff Shadock had arranged a meeting across the river. And there Sally Ord rested, guarded by Indians, unaware of threatening danger. And from the talk just heard, many of the Indians had ridden away to locate the stolen UO herd.

Because Mojave Jack had resorted to disguise, the same plan of escape flashed into Dan's mind. He stripped off the outlaw's vest and pulled it on his body to hide his flannel shirt. He already wore the white chaps. They were a recognized part of Jack's attire. Then he finished the job by masking his face in the goatskin beard and eye patch he had taken from the chaps pocket.

Ready now for the test, he seized the lantern, bade the Indian march ahead as though he were a prisoner. So they climbed the steps, opened the trapdoor, stepped out on the main floor of the bar. They stood near the dark rear entry. The place glared with light. A half dozen men lounged along the bar. Rogan was in sight, but Duff Shadock had disappeared.

Dan called out hoarsely: "Boys—killin' an Injun in my cellar might bring bad luck."

Several of the men laughed, but Red Hoss Rogan swung around sharply. He narrowed his eyes, studying the man who wore the vest and chaps, the facial disguise of Mojave Jack, alias Slinger Geer.

Rogan advanced slowly. "So you figure to bump the Injun off in the brush?" he drawled. Then he yelled and jerked his gun. "*Boys!*" he shouted, "that ain't *Jack*. Jack wasn't wearin' chaps when he went down into the cellar!"

Blam! Rogan's gun blazed. The bullet staggered Dan Burke. It creased his ribs, hurled him against the wall of the entry. Bad Ax whirled to get into the fight. But Dan cried hoarsely: "*Git away, boy!* Git to the chief! Tell him—tell him I sent yuh back—"

Another bullet slammed into the boards not an inch from Dan's face. He broke at the knees, weak from the shock of the bullet that had seared his flesh. Red Hoss Rogan came in on the run, certain that he had planted a death shot. Dan Burke fired from the hip as his knees struck the floor. He saw Red Hoss Rogan reel, fling up his arms, pitch over as though he had run into a stone wall.

An arm hooked around Dan's waist. Bad Ax jerked his white friend through the rear door, supported him as they staggered across the clearing. Bullets tore past them as they entered the first fringe of brush. Dan gasped: "I . . . don't know whether I can make it. My . . . my hoss—" and he pointed out where he had hidden the bay.

He lay like a wounded animal in the brush while Mojave Jack's men carried on their furious search. Slowly his strength returned. He stanched the red flow from the wound in his side. Then—when hostile searchers had wandered off—the young Indian arrived silently as the owl he mocked, leading the bay.

The two rode across the river, red man supporting his injured paleface friend. As the tired bay climbed the western bank, a huge red glare lit up the sky. It outlined an Indian tepee blazing like a bonfire.

"*The chief's lodge!*" shouted Bad Ax.

Dan's weakness departed as the bay galloped up to the fire. Guns were crashing. He heard the thunder of hoofs as riders galloped away into the darkness. He saw Indian women running away from danger. He saw, in front of the fire, two warriors lying limply on their rifles. And recognized in the one with the shaven head, Coyote, the disgraced medicine man.

And then Dan Burke saw Duff Shadock run around the corner of the blazing tepee. The man carried Sally Ord in his arms. At sight of Dan, he released the girl. He stepped forward with a grin.

"Dang near kilt two Injuns to git her. The tepee caught fire in the excitement. But I'm glad yuh got here, *Jack*."

Then for the first time Dan realized he had forgotten to strip off the red mask and eye patch. With his left hand he stripped away the disguise. With his right he jerked his six-gun. Duff Shadock, by his recognition, had clearly proven his part in the rustler plot on the Gunlock.

Duff's smile faded as Dan revealed his features. He took one step forward, gun pitching up. But Dan Burke's bullet cut him down. He sprawled out on the ground beside the old medicine man. And never moved.

Then Dan raised Sally in his arms. While Bad Ax ministered to the two old warriors. They were not badly hurt. But the Coyote pounded his breast, indicating that his heart again was good, that he had, by his fight against Duff Shadock, redeemed his honor and that the chief would allow him again to grow a man's scalp lock.

As the red sun appeared above the skyline, a herd of bellowing cattle trailed past the deserted fort and down toward the crossing. Indians and whites rode in the rising dust.

Kicking Horse, Tip Burke, Uncle Joe Ord, turned away from the herders. They halted when they saw two youths standing there, facing them. One was Dan Burke, the other was Bad Ax. And near them stood yellow-haired Sally Ord.

For a long time Kicking Horse stared into the steady eyes of Dan Burke. His brown old face was like a mask. Then slowly he touched his breast. And he said:

"You are my friend. Your heart is strong. There will be no war against your people on the Gunlock. Not today—*or any day*—so long as Kicking Horse is chief. By the sun, by the fire, by the earth, I swear it."

Dan Burke answered, with a side glance toward Sally:

"Chief—I'm glad to git yore promise. For a certain girl has told me that soon there'll be a *new family* startin' a home along the Gunlock. A new family by the name of Dan Burke—an' wife."

HC

SIOUX BUFFALO HUNTERS BECOME FARMERS

The Sioux Indians, whose ancestors roamed the great plains and were expert buffalo hunters, have become practical, hard-working farmers. And they are making a great success of it, too. These roving red men, whose forbears could never stay long in one place at a time, now have their permanent home on the Standing Rock Reservation in North Dakota. Here they operate irrigated farms along the streams, and produce corn, potatoes, beans, beets, tomatoes and onions.

They have organized a community plan on the lines of the old traditional communal plan of the tribe. They have formed an Irrigation Garden Association, and select their own officers. Each association member works a half-acre plot, and pays a membership fee of four dollars. This fee covers the cost of pumping water to the land, and such tillage work as cannot be done individually.

These sons and grandsons of the old buffalo hunters irrigate their fertile valleys from four to six times during each growing season. By working together, they have been able to control, to a large extent, the damages of drought and the destruc-damages of drout and the destruction of crops by grasshoppers and other insect pests.

There are now one hundred and thirty-seven families engaged in productive farming, producing nearly all the food necessary for all on the reservation, with the exception of meat. A dam is now being constructed to provide water for a thirty-acre development, and more will follow.

It is only natural, after all, that the Indian should be a good farmer. All he needs is to learn the white man's methods. The Indian raised tobacco long before any other race knew that there was such a plant, and it was a gift to the whole world. This one article, cultivated by the Indians for centuries, has given more comfort and enjoyment to mankind than any other luxury that was ever invented.

THE SHADOW OF GILA SINK

By Mojave Lloyd

SALTY SEABRIGHT drew rein and narrowed his yellow eyes. To his knowing ears the distant yammering of coyotes, rising and falling eerily on the soft night breeze, spelled trouble.

Salty wrinkled up his snub nose and hesitated. Maybe it was only a dead bobcat, or a coon. But maybe not. It might have something to do with what he had been thinking about as he rode home to supper. Sending a jet of saliva hissing through a hole where a tooth had been knocked out, he swung his buckskin and lit out through the darkness in the direction of the sound. Salty was that way.

As he guided the cranky buckskin by instinct through the dark scrub timber and up through the jackpine thickets cloaking Cougar Ridge, his thoughts bothered him. Old Cyclone Belle and young Billy were alone in the cabin down on White Crow Creek. He didn't like to have them alone after dark—not with things the way they were. Last night and all day today the obscure wilderness instinct that had so often saved his tough scalp had warned him that something alien was lurking about in his wild High Valley country.

Near the top of the ridge, the wary little mustang runner cached the buckskin in a clump of dogwood and stole on afoot with his carbine in his hand.

Something whirred. Salty stuffed his bandanna into a pocket of his Levis to stop the sound. He had killed a big red-diamond rattler that afternoon and had saved the rattles for young Billy to add to his collection.

On the very tip of the ridge, Salty slid out on a flat boulder and peered down into the black depths of Waterhole Canyon. The yelping and snarling of the coyotes revealed that they were down in the canyon bottom. But it was too dark to see anything. Salty realized that if he started down into that black hole, outlined as he would be against the sky, he would make a fine target for any lurking gun hawk. But he slipped from the rock and went worming his way noiselessly down the steep trail.

Salty Seabright was the human ghost of the Big Grizzlies. When no more than a slick-ear, saved from the charred remnants of a settlers' wagon train which had been mysteriously wiped out in the sun-scorched wastes of Gila Sink, he had built himself a little outfit high in the wilderness on White Crow Creek. From then on he had made his own way, catching and taming wild horses and selling them to the cattlemen on the lower ranges. What he had taken by cunning and grit, he had held by powder smoke. At twenty-one, runty Salty made even the case-hardened gun-dogs who hung out in Bright Angel turn their corners wide.

He reached the floor of the canyon and started to crawl toward the yammering of the coyotes. Suddenly the clamor ceased, telling him he had been scented. Pushing his carbine ahead of him, he crawled stealthily toward the spot where the last yelp had come from, careful not to dislodge the small stones.

He spotted a dark bulk sprawled in the gloom of the canyon wall. Inching his way toward it, he advanced his left hand.

Then he froze. The hair crawled at the base of his neck. It was so still there in the black canyon that the far-off hooting of a pair of horned owls sounded like steamboat whistles.

The dead thing was a horse. But the horse was saddled!

Salty crouched there and did some thinking. He felt over the carcass, but couldn't discover any broken

bones. The beast hadn't fallen down the precipice. It had been killed right there on the canyon floor. Maybe its rider had been killed too —but maybe not. Perhaps at that very moment he was skulking close by.

Another thought struck the little horse tamer. If that rider was still in the canyon he must be downwind, or the coyotes wouldn't have ventured near the dead horse. With a tight feeling in the muscles of his flat jaws, Salty began crawling down the canyon.

He had gone probably two hundred yards, and was snaking his way carefully around a rock pile, when he flattened his belly to the ground. From that pile of loose rocks, only a few feet away, had come a low curse. It might easily be a trick to make Salty straighten up and make a better target of himself.

Salty lay there for several minutes, scarcely breathing. Then he caught a stifled moan. And in a crevice between two rocks, barely visible in the faint light of a slice of moon peaking over the canyon rim, he discerned the outline of a boot.

"Hombre!" he said flatly. "You make one move, and I'll drill a hole the full length of your leg!"

The man in the rocks groaned, made as if to use his hand, mumbled something. Salty eased up to him, then got to his feet, cocked his hat over one ear and stood squinting down with puzzled eyes.

The man was lying on his face. His right leg was firmly wedged between two heavy rocks. Another rock had him pinned by the small of the back. Salty whisked the fellow's six-gun out of his holster and heaved the rock off his spine. But he had to get a tree limb for a pry before he could work his leg loose. The man had passed out.

When he came to, Salty Seabright had kindled a little fire and was dousing his head and face with cold water from a spring. The man struggled to a sitting position. Salty propped him up with a stump.

"So you come back to finish me off, huh?" he mumbled.

"Never finish what I don't start," snapped Salty. He scrutinized the stranger in the light of the flames with hard yellow eyes.

The stranger was old and gaunt, with grizzled gray hair hanging down around his knobby face, half concealing one flinty gray eye. His clothes were in tatters, his lips and tongue swollen from lack of water. But his pointed chin, covered with a scraggle of gray whiskers, jutted out pugnaciously. He pinched at his arms and legs, as if to make sure they were all there.

"You ain't got no busted bones," Salty told him and wrinkled up his snub nose thoughtfully. "To me you look like a tough old scaly-back I don't noways hanker to have hiding out on my horse range. Soon's you can navigate, you light a shuck out of here. Savvy?"

"Ringy little whelp, huh?" grunted the oldster. His flinty old eyes lighted up, as though he had just recollected something. "You wouldn't," he inquired, "be the smoky little hell-bender folks call Salty Seabright?"

"Gun and all!" snapped Salty. "What's it to you?"

A crooked smile broke the harshness of the oldster's face. "Lad," he mumbled, "me and old Sheriff Hightower in Bright Angel rode the river together as kids. Old Hightower swears by you—says you're meaner than a tarantula, but on the

square. That's a-plenty for me. I ain't scairt to talk to you." He swallowed hard.

Salty fetched a hatful of water from the spring and handed it to him. The stranger gulped gratefully, turned the hat in his twisted old hands and went on.

"I'm Jad Hogarth. I'm huntin' up my boy. Jerry ain't bad—just wild as a wolf. He got to figuring a spell back how things was too quiet on my old Circle H, away down on the Pecos, and he lit out. I reckoned maybe I could auger him into some sense, so I trailed him. Last week I run into him in Bright Angel, but after talking a bit he give me the slip. He told me he's riding with the Clancy gang—said if I would go home and shut my trap it wouldn't be long till he'd stock the old Circle H with white-faced cows. He told me something else too—I'll get around to that in a minute." The worn old man gulped some more water.

"The leaves has whispered to me of that mangy Clancy crew," gritted the little horse hunter. "For several weeks now they been hid out over on the far slopes of the Big Grizzlies. The minute they show on my side of the mountains, I'll blow their noses off."

"I was making my way up through here," the old-timer resumed, "towards where they is hid out. I got to save my boy. This morning early I come down in the canyon here to water my hoss. Some dirty gulcher got me from the rim—or figured he did. My hoss piled me into that heap of rocks. Before I could move, them rocks fell down on me. Reckon my sorrel run off."

"He's dead," said Salty. "Looks like he got the slug ticketed for you." He raked his tow-colored thatch with a broken thumb nail. "You got to be fed. And I reckon I'll have to loan you a bronc. You feel spry enough to ride double?"

"Hell's hoptoads!" exploded gaunt old Hogarth, "You may be a mite younger than me, but you ain't no tougher. Let's go!"

They were dropping down to where a light shone in the window of the log cabin on White Crow Creek, Hogarth in the saddle and Salty up behind carrying the oldster's gear, when Salty's memory clicked.

"You said your boy told you something else," he said.

"Damn nigh forgot," old Jad chuckled. "The Clancy gang is riding, hell for leather, over the mountains to burn your cabin down on top of your head!"

They had thrown the buckskin into the pole corral and were washing up for supper outside the cabin door before Salty spoke. He turned from the stump that served as a washstand, soapsuds dribbling from his freckled chin.

"How come," he inquired suspiciously, "this boy of yours talked so much,"

"Jerry was boasting," the oldster grumbled. "He ain't never done nothing wrong, Jerry ain't. This would be his first deal, and he figures it's big stuff. Furthermore, them wolves has filled him plumb full of the notion that you're nothing but a lead-slinging killer that deserves wiping out." While he dried his face and combed his ragged hair with his fingers, old Hogarth talked in snatches.

"The set-up is this," he said. "You know the only crossing over White Crow Creek is right here below your cabin. But to use that crossing for running rustled beef

down toward the Border, Mike Clancy knows he's got to get rid of you. Him and his crew has gathered a herd over on the far side of the mountains. They're shoving them through Bloody Pass tonight—right now! Clancy is sending half a dozen of his killers on ahead to wipe you out, so's the way will be clear for the herd. I was aiming to get my boy out of it, and try to bust things up before anything happened. Get that?"

"Why didn't you come for me," asked Salty tightly, "or fetch along old Spark Hightower?"

"Didn't know where your outfit lay," grumbled the old man, "and had no time to search for it. As for the sheriff—I was scairt he'd come fogging into the hills with a posse and maybe kill my boy."

The two of them went on in. Old Cyclone Belle was bustling about the stove. Young Billy had gone to bed. Old Cyclone skidded a bowl of steaming potatoes angrily across the oilcloth and glared at Salty with her fierce old eyes.

"You reckon I got nothing to do all the time but keep supper hot?" she barked.

Salty ignored that. He was thinking hard. His baleful yellow eyes roved around the bright kitchen. It struck him how different things were since he had rescued young Billy out of a gunfight between two bandit crews when the eight-year-old lad's grandfather had been killed, and had hired old Cyclone Belle Connors to keep house and care for the youngster.

For the first time in his lonely life, Salty Seabright had a home. And now a pack of wolves were on their way to wipe all that out—just to get a creek crossing for stolen beef. Fury blazed in the tough little mustang runner's heart till he could scarcely swallow his food.

Another thought stung him. That herd of rustled beef belonged to stanch friends of his—straight-shooting old cowmen on the lower slopes, the very men who provided Salty's bread and butter by buying the horses he captured and tamed. He had heard that they'd tallied out short a lot of beef lately, and could find no trace of where it had gone. He grated his chair back with a vicious shove and buckled on a spare gunbelt.

"Mister," he gritted, "I always go for trouble before trouble goes for me. *Vamanos!*"

Old Jad Hogarth downed the last of his coffee, bowed ceremoniously to the old woman and limped in Salty's wake.

"Hey!" squalled the irate old Cyclone. "I've plugged up the last hole in your ornery little hide I'm a-goin' to!"

"Hush up, woman!" Salty called back shortly, and headed for the corral.

Halfway between his little horse outfit and Bloody Pass lay a narrow hairpin gorge that the rustled herd would have to tread. Salty led the way toward it through the moonlit timber. He and rugged old Jad kept a keen lookout ahead, searching the ghostly woods and brushy hills with restless eyes. But whether Jerry Hogarth hadn't known what he was talking about, or Mike Clancy had decided not to send part of his crew to the cabin till the herd was nearing there, the two riders hit the mouth of Hairpin Gorge without sighting anyone.

Salty had made his plans clear to the old rawhider on the way up. Working fast, the two gathered dry grass and made a windrow of it

straight across the narrowest part of the gorge, about a third of the way through. On top of the grass they piled brush. When they were finished, they had a barrier four or five feet high, as dry as tinder. The little horse hunter wiped the sweat from his freckled face and spat viciously through his teeth.

"It'll do!" he gritted. "Don't take much fire to spook a lead steer back onto his tail."

He went back a hundred yards and made sure their mounts were safe in a side gully. Then he and old Jad hunkered down with their backs against the wall of the gorge, as quiet as a pair of cougars on the prowl.

A slice of moon was peeking into the gorge when Salty's keen ears picked up the distant low rumble of a bawling herd. Soon there came the dry clashing of horns and the rattle of hoofs, with occasionally the high-pitched curse of a tired-out rider.

"We'll let 'em get right close," whispered Salty grimly. "Won't nobody be riding point—not in here where the critters ain't got no place to go but straight ahead or straight up."

They waited till a slab-sided red lead steer showed plainly in the dim white light. Then they slipped out to the center of their barricade, lit matches to the tinderlike stuff and one worked each way. By the time they reached the walls, the windrow was shooting tongues of flame skyward and crackling like exploding cartridges.

The thud of oncoming hoofs ceased abruptly. For a tense moment not a sound broke the stillness of the mountain night. Then with a bedlam of wild bawls and crashing horns that fear-crazed herd turned tail and stampeded back through the gorge like a locoed avalanche.

Salty leaped to his feet and scuttled for the horses. Old Jad grabbed a limb he had placed handy and raked away a section of the fire. They blindfolded the horses and led them through the opening. Then the two hit leather.

"We got to scatter them cattle till all hell won't hold 'em," shouted Salty, "so's they can't gather 'em again. Don't bother with no *hombres* right now, unless one gets in your road."

But men got in their road—about ten of them. As Salty and the old rawhider burst from the upper end of the gorge, the outlaw pack spotted them and bore down around both flanks of the flying herd.

Salty's crackling carbine emptied two saddles and old Jad got one before they went plunging in among those stampeding steers. Salty saw two more men go down to ugly death under those churning hoofs. His wedge-shaped little face twisted in a wry grin. Emptying both six-shooters, he spat accurately between his lunging roan's ears.

"Ki-yi-ai-ai-e-e!" he shrilled. "Poison-oakers on the prod!"

He pointed up the slope toward a dense thicket of jackpine. "That's it, old-timer! Scatter steers like you hated 'em, then hurry and meet me up there!"

Half an hour later, after he had run bunches of crazed steers down the lower slopes in every direction, he circled wide and stole into the jackpine thicket where he and his old partner were to meet and figure their next move. But the oldster was nowhere to be seen. Salty tied the heaving roan and with a gun in each hand searched every square yard of the gloomy thicket.

Old Jad had vanished. So had everybody else. Salty listened—put his ear to the ground and listened some more. Except for the rustling of the leaves and singing of pine needles, not a sound could he hear. He cocked his battered hat to one side of his straw-colored thatch, rubbed his right thigh where a bullet had scorched it, then gave his gun-belts a hitch and started back to the roan.

"Horse-feathers!" he muttered. "I ain't noways even well warmed up!"

He had been on the point of returning home, feeling that his work was done. But thought of the flinty-eyed oldster who had sided him goaded him into changing his mind. He'd have to save the old man if he could. He couldn't know for sure of course whether old Jad was living or dead. But somehow he had a suspicion the grizzled old rawhider had fallen into the hands of a rustler crew. Pointing the roan toward the high country, he hunched his scrawny shoulders against the chill night wind and swept upward through the dark timber.

He figured that since their drive had gone haywire and he had escaped, the Clancy crew would know the game was up—would know that perhaps by daybreak they would have a hard-eyed mob of quick-triggered cowboys fogging it on their trail. They'd better burn the breeze for the border. But before heading out, chances were they'd dust back to their hideaway to pick up spare horses and gear. Salty spat hissingly down-wind and rode his spurs furiously.

It was no tracking job. Milling down from the hide-out, the herd had left a trail a blind man could have retraced. And when that trail led finally over a ridge and down into Bad Injun Flats, Salty wasn't surprised. It wasn't the first time owl-hooters had used the old abandoned sheep camp in the Flats to hole up in.

Years before, a bunch of sheepmen had pushed woolies into the Big Grizzlies and built their central camp in the Bad Injun. But the cattlemen had risen up and sent the sheep herders flying. The old camp had long since fallen into decay. The only building left with a roof on it was the cookshack.

Salty glimpsed a dim light in the glass window. Ripping his shirt off, he muzzled the roan with it to guard against his nickering, then tied him in a thicket of mountain mahogany and crept toward the cookshack.

As he advanced stealthily through a tangle of chickweed, he could hear the rumble of hoarse voices. Above all the rest rose a single voice that cut razor sharp through the darkness.

"You won't beef them till I *tell* you to beef them!" it rasped. "Two-legged skunks can groan a-plenty before they die."

When Salty inched up to within a few feet of the window and cautiously raised himself up behind the shelter of a manzanita bush, the sight that met his eyes turned his blood to ice.

Old Jad Hargarth and a young fellow who looked too much like the oldster to be anybody but his son were spread-eagled against the end wall of the shanty, pinned there by bowie knives stuck through the flesh of their forearms. In the fitful light of a guttering kerosene lamp the weak-chinned face of the younger man was a ghastly gray, festooned with sweat. But old Jad's scraggly jaw jutted out pugnaciously. In his

faded eyes glowed the light of battle. His voice stung.

"Go ahead, you yellow-livered varmints!" he taunted, spitting toward where a paunchy thug was heating running irons in a fire on the earthen floor. "Paint all the brands you like on my old hide, but don't you harm my boy. You touch one of them hot irons to Jerry, and sure as I'm a Hogarth I'll live to slit the gullets of the whole damn pack of you!"

His threat was greeted by a chorus of laughs. Salty couldn't see the gents who laughed. He figured they were most likely hunkered against the walls enjoying the show. But he could see a face that struck like a bombshell in his memory—a face as evil as ever rode the night trails.

Mike Clancy was leaning negligently against the far wall, directly facing the window. But Salty figured the darkness and the manzanita would protect him from discovery. The outlaw leader's savage face glowed a sickly yellow in the lamplight, a thin high-cheekboned face set with glittering black eyes sunk deep beneath bristling black eyebrows that met above the bridge of his bony nose. Flitting over that face was a smile of sadistic and bestial cruelty.

"I'll learn your cub, you old curly-wolf, to let his tongue wag about *my* plans. There ain't no way on earth that fire-eatin' Seabright polecat could have got wise to what was comin' off but by your cub squealin'. I'll learn the both of you. We figured you was dead in the bottom of Waterhole Canyon. Now you *will* be. But first I aim to make you eat crow."

With a boot toe he roughly prodded the paunchy gent crouched over the fire. "Lardy!" he rasped. "You ever goin' to get them belly-ticklers hot?"

The man called Lardy straightened with a sizzling hot iron in each hand. "Keno, boss," he blubbered. He held the running irons aloft so everyone could see the little showers of white sparks spewing from the ends.

Mike Clancy moved forward with a smooth sliding motion and tore the two captives' shirts up out of their Levis. A sobbing moan dribbled between young Jerry Hogart's writhing blue lips.

"Leave that boy be!" grated old Jad.

In that fleeting instant, Salty's whole life went shutting through his head. Out of the dark past arose an image that tortured him, brought tense white lines around his grim mouth. In memory he lived again through the bitterest scene of his life—the wild raid of a band of murderous outlaws on a helpless wagon train.

Out of the blood and powder-smoke of that red night had emerged one lone survivor, a bit of a boy, rescued by a kindly old stage driver. That boy was now Salty Seabright. It was no wonder he was hard as flint—that old Hub McCoy, the stage driver, once said he must have been sired by a grizzly and suckled by a wolf.

Saffron flames were dancing in Seabright's baleful yellow eyes. There before him swam the high-cheekboned face of the savage fiend who had led the attack on the wagon train—the face Salty had always known he would see again if he waited long enough. Blood rushed to the scrawny mustang runner's head till he was dizy.

He forgot all about Jad Hogarth and his son—forgot all about Cy-

clone Belle and young Billy, and the herd of rustled beef. One thought alone was clanging like a trip hammer in his seething brain—to get Mike Clancy. The calloused finger of his right hand whitened on the trigger of his scarred old Bisley death dealer. Then he stopped.

He couldn't kill a man that way—not even Mike Clancy. No human lobo ever needed a killing worse. But Salty couldn't commit murder—not even to revenge a whole wagon train of murdered settlers, including his own mother and father. It just wasn't Salty's way.

He'd kill Mike Clancy if it was his dying act. But the devil would get his break. Like a snake advancing its head to strike, the deadly little horse hunter slid his tow-colored thatch and naked shoulders over the window sill.

That shanty was so still the gnawing of a mouse somewhere rasped like a buzz saw in a knot. Breath hissed through teeth. The saffron-flecked eyes of the little mustang runner locked with the glittering black eyes of Mike Clancy.

"Clancy!" hissed Salty softly. "I've come for you—clean from Gila Sink. Draw fast and shoot straight!"

A twig snapped. Seabright dropped like a shot—but too late. Something that felt like the peak of Thunder Mountain crashed down on top of his head.

It seemed like years afterward that his senses slowly formed out of a black fog. His head was one shrieking pain. He tried to move, but his ankles were bound and his wrists lashed behind his back. He forced his eyelids apart and looked around.

By the light of the oil lamp smoking on a box, he saw that he was lying in a corner of the shanty. Nearby lay old Jad Hogarth and his boy, both motionless. Over by the door a guard sat on an upturned nail keg, nodding sleepily with a Winchester across his knees.

Words he had heard in a stupor clamored in Salty's ears—words he had heard spoken by the harsh voice of Mike Clancy and the blubbering Lardy. The only reason Salty was alive was that Lardy had sprung something.

Salty had heard him tell Clancy and the crew that at the time young Billy had been rescued by Seabright, the youngster's grandpop had cached twenty thousand dollars of loot. Why not get hold of the kid and make him tell where it was? Mike Clancy had rapped out orders like rifle fire.

Tuffy Grogan would guard the prisoners. Clancy and Buckshot Barnes would streak for Salty's cabin, kill the old woman and fetch up the youngster. All the rest of the crew would ride hell-for-leather and round up those cattle again.

"If the button won't talk," Clancy had rasped, as he and the crew went scrambling for their mounts, "we'll carve up this Seabright polecat plumb in front of his eyes till he *does* talk!"

Salty lay there on the earthen floor noiselessly straining with every ounce of his strength against the lashings on his wrists. Beads of sweat stood out on his tanned forehead. But the knots wouldn't give a fraction of an inch. Then an idea filtered through Salty's muddled consciousness. There was one chance in a thousand it might work.

He settled his shoulder blades and stealthily drew his skinny knees up till the spike heels of his heavy cowhide boots were set firmly in the

earthen floor. Then he shivered enough to make the snake rattles in his pocket whir sharply like dry peas in a pod, closed his eyes to thin slits and lay as still as death.

That dozing guard came up off his nail keg as though a scorpion had stung him. He stood there hesitantly for a minute, then turned his head. Salty shivered again. Tuffy Grogan's head snapped back. On tiptoe he came toward the corner where Salty lay.

Ten feet away he stopped. Salty waited till he turned his head, then gave another shiver. Grogan jumped, turned and came on, peering warily around, his carbine gripped in both hands. At Salty's feet he stooped his lanky body and searched the ground around his prisoner with probing bloodshot eyes. Salty unwound.

The boxed toes of his heavy cowhides struck the point of Tuffy Grogan's chin with a sound like ice cracking. Grogan half straightened, then pitched forward. His veined nose collided with the earth.

Salty worked fast. Rolling like mad, he made two trips across to the far side of the cabin, one with Grogan's Winchester in his bound hands, the other with the guard's six-gun. On that side was a crude table cluttered with dirty dishes and eating tools. Seabright got hold of a butcher knife, wedged the handle in to a crack between boards of the table top and went to work. In two minutes he was free.

With the hogging strings he had been lashed with, he trussed up Tuffy Grogan more tightly than Grogan had ever been bound before. He tried to rouse the Hogarths. But both were insensible from loss of blood. Hastily binding their arms with strips torn from their shirts, Salty slashed their bonds and lugged them out and hid them in the brush. Two minutes more and he had reached his hidden roan, hit the saddle and went slamming down the trail toward home.

"*Home!*" he gritted as he rode. "Like as not, I ain't got no more home than a hen's got teeth!"

All he had suffered faded from his thoughts. Boiling in his mind he now had but one fixed idea—to save young Billy and Cyclone Belle. Thought of those two loved ones helpless in the cruel hands of the savage Mike Clancy froze the marrow in his bones. He hunched his naked shoulders and jabbed in the hooks till the bounding mustang's withers were rising and falling like pistons and his ears were glued to his neck.

That flying roan was lathered as if he'd been soaped when Salty rocketed around the corner of the haybarn on the home spread. Salty was but dimly aware that for the last streaking mile the night wind had been carrying the sound of six-guns and rifle fire, answered by the throaty blare of a shotgun. Without so much as easing the thundering mustang's stride, Salty left the saddle and plowed yard gravel with his heels.

It was Buckshot Barnes' own fault that he had been using a wagon box beside the haybarn for a barricade, squarely in Seabright's path. Salty struck the ground almost on top of him, spun the rifle in his hands and slammed the butt smashing against the side of the renegade's head. A hot slug dumped Salty in a heap.

Out of the blaze of fire that scorched his brain, he glimpsed where the gun flame had come from. Mike Clancy was forted up in the wagon shed, from where he could

pour a crossfire on the window and door of the dark cabin. Salty shook his head like a bear in a deadfall, floundered to his feet and started zigzagging like a wavering finger of doom straight toward the man he hated most on earth.

Screaming lead ripped his clothes. A bullet smoked through his hair. His rifle was shot out of his hands. Whipping out the short gun he had taken from Grogan, he came zigzagging on. Not a shot did he fire.

There was something starkly inhuman about that scrawny advancing figure, silent, stumbling, zigzagging straight into that withering rifle fire like a grim little avenging devil out of hell. The sight was too much for Mike Clancy. He broke and ran.

Salty let him get within one jump of the corner of the shed, then poured it to him. Clancy started to fall, then stiffened bolt upright. Almost like a machine, his left hand slid a Colt from its holster and brought it up.

"Clancy!" hissed Salty softly. "Here's for hell and Gila Sink!"

Deliberately and accurately, he planted a slug in Clancy's teeth. Then he himself hit the gravel.

He woke up in the cabin to find Cyclone Belle applying bandages and young Billy scowling manlike at a burly old man sprawling in a chair beside the table. The big man saw that Salty was awake and chuckled.

"Hell's fire and hot biscuits!" he rumbled. "When they get you riled, Salty, danged if you ain't right down mean. You chousin' them cow critters down the slopes roused up all us cowmen. What you'd left of the Clancy gang, we tangled with. We didn't seem to take no prisoners. The Hogarths has headed out for the Pecos. Old Jad said to tell you 'much obliged.' How you feel?"

Salty shoved up off the cot and slumped groggily in a chair. Cyclone Belle twisted her apron in her gnarled old hands and glared at him with fierce eyes.

"You stir up one more such fracas, you little whippersnapper," warned the irate old woman, "and I'm a-goin' to work you over with my scatter-gun."

"Hush up, woman!" said Salty grinning. "Trot out some grub!"

Watch out for another action story about Salty Seabright soon.

"I TALKED WITH GOD"

(yes, I did—actually and literally)

and, as a result of that little talk with God some ten years ago, a strange new Power came into my life. After 43 years of horrible, sickening, dismal failure, this strange Power brought to me a sense of overwhelming victory, and I have been overcoming every undesirable condition of my life ever since. What a change it was. Now—I have credit at more than one bank, I own a beautiful home, drive a lovely car, own a newspaper and a large office building, and my wife and family are amply provided for after I leave for shores unknown. In addition to these material benefits, I have a sweet peace in my life. I am happy as happy can be. No circumstance ever upsets me, for I have learned how to draw upon the invisible God-Law, under any and all circumstances.

You too may find and use the same staggering Power of the God-Law that I use. It can bring to you too, whatever things are right and proper for you to have. Do you believe this? It won't cost much to find out—just a penny post-card or a letter, addressed to Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 495-10, Moscow, Idaho, will bring you the story of the most fascinating success of the century. And the same Power I use is here for your use too. I'll be glad to tell you about it. All information about this experience will be sent you free, of course. The address again—Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 495-10, Moscow, Idaho. Advt. Copyright 1939 Frank B. Robinson.

Jest One Good Arm

by ARTHUR L. RAFTER

Slim Prout hooks up in six-gun play
  With a greaser from Blanco's gang,
An' after the smoke has blowed away
  There's a Mex too dead to hang.

Then we hear Slim's skinny arm was hit,
  An' he's rode off after the fight,
To'rd Hoopertown, where Doc DeWitt
  Kin plug the hole up right.

When Blanco hears that his man is dead
  He swears that he'll git Slim Prout.
He swears that he'll fill him full o' lead,
  An' cut his gizzard out.

We send Slim word for to rest a spell,
  An' not to come back too soon,
Or Blanco will git him shore as hell;
  But he comes on the stage that noon.

He's wearin' a red bandanna sling
  That's holdin' his thin right paw,
An' the butt of his gun is turned to swing
  For a easy left-hand draw.

Big Blanco hears Slim's made the trip
  An', sneakin' up from in back,
Grab's Slim's left arm in a viselike grip
  An' shoves him agin' a shack.

Then, reachin' for Slim's big .44,
  He snarls: "I mak' you fix
So you nevair shoot my man no more!"
  But the empty gun jest clicks.

As Blanco cusses an' drops the thing,
  An' goes for his own good Colt,
Slim's right hand leaps from the shelterin' sling
  With a hogleg gun in its holt.

Big Blanco tries to grab Slim's wrist
  Before he kin start to shoot,
But Slim breaks loose with a sudden twist
  An' drills the murderin' coot.

"I reckoned he'd go for my one good arm,"
  Says Slim, "an' be easy to fool,
If I kept it hid all safe from harm
  With this snub-nosed shootin' tool."

A HOSS DEAL

1. Bronc Evans and Bart Albers were taking Bronc's trick horse, Blacky, to the nearest shipping point. Hard times had forced Bart to sell the performing cayuse to a circus. In a mountain pass, two bandits swooped down on them.

2. Blacky broke loose from Bronc, who drew his Colt but didn't fire. The bandits had Bart covered, and one of them snarled: "If yuh horn in, cowboy, we'll burn yore boss down." Bart had reached for his six-gun, but he stopped.

3. Bronc and Bart gave up without a fight, and the bandits disarmed them. "We know thet hoss o' yourn cain't be ketched by no one but you, Evans," one of the bandits sneered. "It's worth plenty, thet hoss, an' we aim to git it."

4. With two six-guns covering him, Bronc obeyed orders. He rode up to Blacky and grabbed the dragging halter. Bart glumly looked on, both bandits guarding him. "They got us, Blacky," Bronc spoke to the trick horse.

FOR BRONC EVANS

5. Leading Blacky, Bronc rode before the bandits. "Now head out through the pass," one of them told him. "We'll be clost behind yuh, so don't try nothin' funny." Bronc was sorry for Bart. The loss of the prized trick cayuse was tough.

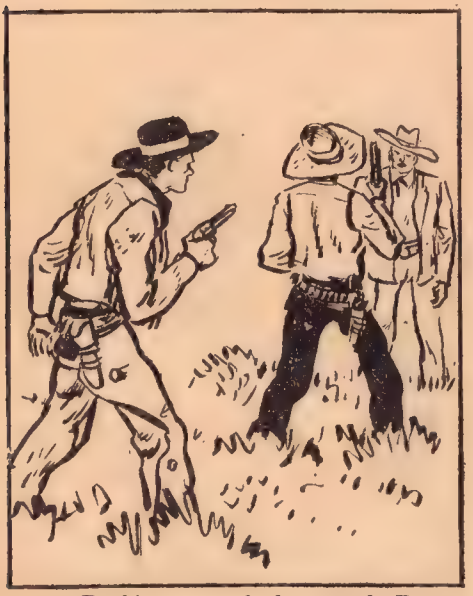
6. The bandits herded their prisoners to a deserted ranch, where they dismounted. "Take the black cayuse into thet corral," a bandit ordered Bronc, walking beside him as he led Blacky in. The other bandit prodded Bart.

7. Putting his fingers to his lips, Bronc emitted a shrill whistle. The trick horse pricked up its ears. So many attempts had been made to steal Bar A horses, Bronc had taught Blacky to defend himself. The whistle was a signal for him.

8. At Bronc's startling whistle, the bandit reached for his six-gun. At the same instant Blacky reared and stood over him. Bronc jumped to one side. It would be just too bad for the bandit if those hoofs chopped down.

9. Blacky came down to earth, and out lashed his front hoofs. They hit the bandit like sledge hammers, battering him to the ground, then trampling him. Bronc jumped forward to check the horse's attack. "Don't kill him, Blacky!" he cried.

10. Blacky snorted, shook his head and stopped trampling his victim. Bronc knelt over the battered and unconscious killer. "He ain't dead," Bronc decided, picking up the bandit's six-gun. "Though he won't be doin' no more hoss stealin'."



11. Dashing out of the corral, Bronc looked for Bart. "Hey," Bronc yelled, "quit thet!" The bandit who had taken Bart away now aimed his six-gun to shoot the Bar A owner in cold blood! Unafraid, Bart stared into the eyes of death.

12. At Bronc's shout the bandit whirled in surprise, for he probably thought his pard had killed the waddy long ago. The killer and the Bar A cowboy faced each other with drawn six-guns. Bart, helpless to act, had to look on in suspense.

13. Bronc and the bandit leveled blued-steel Colt barrels at each other. *Br-rang!* Bronc and the bandit fired, the explosions of the two Colts blending into one roar of six-gun thunder. Streamers of orange-red flame and sparks lanced out.

14. The bandit swayed, then toppled to the ground like a lightning-blasted pine tree. Bronc's trigger squeeze had been a shade quicker than his foe's, his bullet tearing through the killer's heart. "Got him," Bronc muttered grimly.

15. Bart ran over to Bronc and shouted: "Plumb good shootin', cowboy! I reckoned my time had come, yuh betcha. Look who's a-comin'!" Toward them trotted Blacky. "Good ol' hoss, Blacky!" Bronc laughed.

16. Bart patted the trick cayuse affectionately. "We're callin' off thet hoss deal, Bronc," said the rancher. "We ain't sellin' Blacky to no circus, nor anyone else. If a circus needs a hoss like him, the Bar A needs him a lot more!"

SETBACKS OF PIONEER COWMEN

THE cattlemen and cowboys who tamed the great plains regions did not accomplish their task without continual troubles and losses, against which they had to wage an endless fight. People are apt to envy the ranchmen of the early days because they made good and left big fortunes when they passed on. But success required much more self-sacrifice in the cattle business than in any other. In the first place, they had to fight. They had to be quick on the trigger if they wanted to live. They had to have courage which nothing could depress. They had to be on the watch day and night. They slept with their guns under their pillows, and even that precaution did not always save them from rustlers and killers.

Disappointments came often. But the cowmen had grit and guts. Nothing daunted them. They were out to make good, and they did. But their setbacks were many. The one thing that caused them more worry and stirred them more to anger than any other was the killing of their brave cowhands on the trails. This was always a source of grief to the owners of herds.

The one man who owned more cattle than any other ranchman in the whole Western country was John Chisum. His Long Rail brand and his Jingle Bob mark were known wherever cattle were found. For some time Chisum had his ranch in Coleman County, Texas, where he bought the general store of Bill Franks, at Trickham. Franks was responsible for the curious name of the settlement, for he was a great practical joker and was always playing tricks on his customers. The place had no name at that time, and the victims of Bill's jokes gave him the nickname of "Trick'em." The store soon became known as "Trick-'em's Place," and in time it spread to the settlement. When application was made for a post office, the name, Trick'em, was submitted, but the authorities changed the spelling to Trickham, and the settlement has never been known by any other name.

After Chisum had moved to his new range on the Pecos River, in New Mexico, he returned to Trickham one time and bought eleven hundred steers to fill a beef contract at Fort Stanton. He paid eighteen dollars a head for the steers and was to receive thirty-five a head at the army post. This would have been a good profit. But luck was against the cattleman on this trip. During the drive, a large band of Apaches swooped down on the herd and stampeded it. John Chisum and his trail hands arrived at Fort Stanton with exactly six steers.

As Coleman County became more settled by farmers and some-seekers, the frontier cattlemen felt that they were too crowded and decided to move on. As one of them expressed it, "they wanted more elbow room," and they got it. They moved to the Pecos and beyond it, where, for many years, the range was boundless and grass was free.

KID WOLF—GUN GAMBLER

by WARD M. STEVENS

Author of "Sonny Tabor Springs A Trap," etc.

KID WOLF—GUN GAMBLER

Blazing renegade greed against the hot lead of lawmen—with Kid Wolf drawing deuces in the middle for that fortune of gold at stake.

By Ward M. Stevens

CHAPTER I.

A BUTCHER SHOP ON WHEELS.

When Kid Wolf heard that unmistakable sound—it was like strong cloth being forcibly ripped—he knew that a rifle bullet had missed him by inches. Instinctively he ducked his head, which he had already lowered to keep the rain out of his eyes. Just as impulsively his sun-browned hands dropped toward his holstered Colt Peacemakers. But he didn't complete his quick-starting draw; instead, he lifted his hands shoulder-high and stiffened in his saddle. He was covered at close range by rifles and six-guns. His only chance for life was to signify his surrender.

The Kid had been riding head down with his lean face shaded by the wide brim of his sombrero, and he hadn't seen the half-tipped stagecoach, or the men who were robbing it, until he was within a stone's throw of the gruesome scene. The coach was at the bottom of the long hill and tilted crazily against the steep bank. The horses had either broken away from it or had been cut loose, and in the middle of the road the lifeless body of the stage guard lay sprawled, still gripping his shotgun while the rain splashed down in his upturned face.

A scowling, beetle-browed hombre on a trigueño horse had emerged from the bush clumps not ten yards from Kid Wolf, and was holding a leveled carbine. It was this man who had fired the shot, for pale blue smoke was still whipping from the big bore of the rifle.

"That's it—keep yore grub hooks up in the air, feller!" he ordered.

Two other mounted bandits were alongside the wrecked coach, and they also were staring malignantly at the Kid over their gun sights. One of them was holding a canvas bag in his free hand. He dropped it onto the road, and the Kid heard the clink of coins.

"Whar'n'ell did *this* jasper come from?" roared out the hombre who appeared to be the leader. "Git his cutters, Dave, and make him git off his hoss."

Blizzard—the Kid's huge, snow-white horse—snorted uneasily as the fourth member of the gang took him by the head. Kid Wolf was forced to dismount alongside the coach, and the one called Dave relieved him of his .45s, while the other three held the drop.

The Kid forgot his anger for a moment in his surprise at noting the youthfulness of Dave. He was a mere baby, compared with the others, and couldn't have been much over fourteen. Small for his age, too, with queer eyes that seemed much too large for his sharp little face. He was handling a big Colt six-gun, however, in a very businesslike way indeed!

"Well, what yuh gawkin' at, hom-

bre?" he demanded shrilly, and the Kid noticed that he was holding the gun hammer back with a shaky thumb.

"Take it easy, *muchacho,*" advised the Kid in his slow Texas drawl.

"I'll see if he's got any dinero on him," growled one of the other bandits, a hulking man with a fringe of coppery beard. "I'd have blasted him in the fust place, but I was afeard that hoss of his would git away from us. That bronc is wuth a lot o' money." He slid from his saddle and came toward the Texan, who still had his hands lifted.

"Hold on a minute, Tobe," cut in the bandit leader. "I think thar's an hombre still alive inside the coach. Drag him out, one of yuh, and let him have it! We don't want no witnesses to carry tales."

Kid Wolf could see inside the Concord stage, and what he saw jolted him with horror. The coach was literally a slaughterhouse on wheels. Four or five bodies, some in hideously cramped sitting positions and others on the floor, choked the death vehicle and had spattered everything with blood. And from the high seat overhead dangled the murdered driver, his arms hanging grotesquely. The Kid understood, now, just about how much mercy *he* could expect from this quartet of cutthroats.

One of the coach's occupants had somehow escaped the murderous volleys that had been poured into the Concord, and the youngster called Dave pulled him out. "Let *me* handle this ol' hombre!" he cried in a voice that chilled the Texan's heart.

The rain had stopped as suddenly as it had begun, but yellow streams of water were still pouring down the timbered mountainside and through the ruts of the sandy road. The young bandit dragged his fear-paralyzed victim—a white-haired old miner—a short distance away, and tipped him into the mud.

"D-d-don't kill me!" the miner pleaded.

The horror-struck Texan echoed the cry. "Let him live, you ringtail!"

The Kid turned his head, sickened, for Dave had put the muzzle of his six-gun close to the old hombre's temple and pulled the trigger. Then the bloodthirsty young hellion searched his victim's clothes for money.

"Only had 'leven dollars on him," he announced sharply. "See what's on them jaspers in the coach."

The red-whiskered bandit was leering at Kid Wolf over his cocked pistol. "Fust of all, we'll put a blue whistler through *this* ranny's clock, an'—"

"Hold on!" The leader of the evil quartet had dismounted and was striding closer to the Texan. He was a squat, barrel-chested man of forty, and his puffy red-veined cheeks had crinkled in an unexpected grin. The sun had crept out of the cloud curtain, and he was staring hard at the Kid as though seeing him for the first time.

"Hey, Buckskin Jack! Why didn't yuh say who yuh was in the fust place?" he bellowed. "We come damn near—yuh *are* Buckskin Jack Northflint, ain't yuh?"

The Kid had to think fast to take advantage of this slim loophole. "Suppose I am?" he drawled, wondering who he was being taken for. The nickname fitted him well enough, for he *was* dressed in soft fringed buckskins, but he had no idea who Northflint could be.

"Well, I'm Bat Storms—the hombre yuh sent down to Cruces for," said the boss bandit with a loud guffaw. "Some joke, eh, Jack? I

should've knowed yuh from yore description—yuh *said* yuh'd be ridin' a white cayuse, but I was lookin' for yuh to meet us in Santa Fé, like the plans was."

Kid Wolf forced a smile to his lips as the others gathered close about him. He would have to bluff—and without any cards whatever. Storms had holstered his gun, but the others were still covering him, doubtful looks on their coarse faces.

"I wasn't expectin' you men for a day or so," the Kid said, seeing he had to say something. He realized, however, that he was treading on thin ice; if he made one little slip—

"Is yore gang in Santa Fe? Is the money still at the gov'nor's palace? Nothin' has gone wrong with yore scheme, has it?" Bat Storms was firing rapid questions.

"Everything is *bueno*," the Kid ventured. "I'm expectin' to meet my men in town later. We'll ride on to Santa Fe together. Your men are fast workers." He smiled, glancing at the stage and its ghastly cargo. "But don't you-all think it's time we were movin' away from here?"

"Good idee," approved Storms, with a snaggle-toothed grin. "Somebody might be comin' 'long the trail any time. Dave, hand back Jack Northflint's guns. I hope yo're not ringy, Jack, for firin' at yuh and handlin' yuh rough. We didn't know—"

"Not at all," drawled the Kid politely, reaching out for his gun belts. "It only shows how efficient you gentlemen are as road agents."

CHAPTER II.

TWENTY MINUTES IN THE JAIL HOUSE.

KID WOLF had been bound for Santa Fe, and had been within four or five miles of it when he met up with the Bat Storms crew. Just what this adventure would lead him to he couldn't guess, but he at least had a breathing spell. And in Santa Fe he might get in touch with law officers. There was a chance, too, that he might catch these murderers off guard and get the drop on them before reaching town.

He soon found that this last would be impossible. Bat Storms seemed thoroughly convinced that the Kid was Buckskin Jack but the other three hombres were suspicious and rode right behind him with their hands on the butts of their Colts. Tobe Yeager was the red-bearded bandit's moniker, the Kid learned, and the name of the tallest was Jake Turner. The calloused youth who had fired the death shot into the miner's brain was named Dave Holly.

"We never pass up no bets, Buckskin," Bat Storms grinned as he rode alongside the Kid's powerful white horse, "so we thought we'd knock over the stage on the way in."

The road agents had taken stock of their gains from the robbery. Storms cheerfully announced that the total—the contents of the money sack and the sums filched from the slain men's pockets—came to seventeen hundred-odd dollars. "Not anything, Jack, compared with the rake-off we'll git at the gov'nor's palace," he admitted to the Kid, "but at least it's somethin'."

"Speakin' of the treasure, Northflint," rumbled Jake Turner, "how much gold did yuh say thar was?"

"It's even more than I first estimated," was the Texan's shot in the dark. He wondered what this was all about, and how long he could keep up his bluff.

"Pete Redondo said we could count on three hundred thousand," Storms said. "How's our ol' pard, Pete, gittin' along, and whar is he?"

"He's at the hide-out," replied the

Kid with a nonchalance he didn't quite feel. "Well, here *we* are in Santa Fe."

They had rounded a curve in the trail and now, as they descended a piñon-dotted hill, they saw the ancient *ciudad* spread out in the mountain-hemmed valley at their feet. It was a symphony in green and brown, wth the long, flat-roofed adobes contrasting with the many trees. Above everything towered the weathered old cathedral, mellowed by centuries.

The Kid was fairly familiar with the New Mexican pueblo, and he led the way down a narrow, gravelly street to the big open plaza. Yeager, Turner, and the queer little devil of a Dave Holly seemed to be watching his every move, and he knew that giving these bandits the slip would be even more difficult than he had thought.

"From what Pete said, yuh aim to grab up that gover'ment gold inside the next few days," Bat Storms grunted. "Do we stay here, or go to join yore outfit up Cochiti way?"

Cochiti! So that was where the Northflint gang—whoever they were—holed up! The Kid had heard of that wilderness country; since prehistoric times it had been peopled only by cave-dwelling Indians. The Kid heartily hoped that Northflint and all his ilk were in Cochiti, and not in Santa Fé!

"We'll stay in a lodgin' house here in town tonight," he said as he casually laced a brown cigarette.

Many big freighters and dozens of other wagons were drawn up in the town square, which was closed in on three sides by store buildings. The north side was taken up by the famous palace of the governors, dating from early Spanish days. It was of one story, long and low, with tremendously thick adobe walls. Bat Storms grinned as he stared at it, and licked his thick lips greedily.

With his vigilant companions right at his heels, Kid Wolf turned to the left as they reached the plaza and entered San Francisco Street, which was so narrow that only one freighter could navigate it at a time. The narrow sidewalks teemed with bearded plainsmen and mountaineers, hunters and trappers, and Mexicans in colorful *serapes*. These last, and Indians, predominated.

The buckskin-clad Texan and his four unwanted saddle mates dismounted at the hitch rail in front of the Casa Grande Hotel. Turner and Yeager, especially, were watchful of the Kid as they all entered the lobby, which was also a saloon. Kid Wolf was beginning to wonder when, if at all, he would be able to rid himself of the bandit quartet long enough to notify the authorities.

"What'll it be, strangers?" demanded the black-mustached bartender as the five lined up at the high counter.

"Strangers, eh?" growled Tobe Yeager, with a sidelong look at the Kid. "I thought yuh was well-knowed yere in Santy Fe, Northflint."

"I don't *want* to be too well known," said the Texan mildly as he ordered beer, a drink twice as expensive as the Taos Lightning whiskey that was sold.

"That's right," Storms said. "Jack is smart. Well, here's bottoms up."

The bandits had ordered their second drink when Kid Wolf heard the trampling of boots at the rear door of the barroom. At the same instant three or four hombres with guns in their hands came surging in at the front. Several were wearing officer's badges. An excited crowd was gathered in the street behind him.

"Get 'em up, yuh damned *bandidos!*" rasped the man with the sheriff's star. "We'll kill the first of yuh that reaches low!"

Kid Wolf, much relieved at this unexpected break, was the first to elevate his hands. Tobe Yeager swore under his breath, stepped back from the bar and then did likewise. Dave Holly, Jake Turner and Bat Storms followed suit.

"Take their hardware, men!" the sheriff commanded, as his henchmen swarmed around their prisoners. "Whar's those witnesses? These are the cutthroats we want, ain't they?" he demanded of a group of weather-stained hombres who had entered the saloon at the heels of the *policia*.

"These're the men," nodded the spokesman grimly. "We was above 'em on the trail when he saw 'em robbin' the dead men's bodies and they ain't no mistake about it! We watched ontil they rode off and then follered 'em in to town. I wish yuh could've seen thet coach, sheriff! Hangin' is too good for these skunks!"

The Kid saw now that clearing himself would be no easy chore. The witnesses hadn't arrived on the murder scene soon enough for them to know that he'd taken no part in the killings, and naturally he was considered one of the bandits.

Twilight was settling over the town as the Texan and the four road agents were marched around the corner to the jail amid a crowd shouting in both English and Spanish. They went through an office, where an oil lamp was already lighted, and then were herded into a cell. The door, a heavy grating of steel bars, clanged shut and was locked.

"The accommodations ain't so good," the sheriff shrugged, "but you rattlers won't be here long—justice is plenty pronto in Santa Fe."

Knowing that this would be an inopportune time to make a statement of the facts to the officers, the Kid squatted down on one of the iron bunks. Strange, how things had worked out! Back there on the trail his only chance for life had been to bluff his way into the murder party, and now it seemed that he'd talked his way into a hangman's noose.

The loot, which had been in the possession of Bat Storms, had been taken at the jail office and was now being counted and checked by the sheriff and a deputy. The other officers had left, evidently for the spot where the crime had been committed, and the crowd outside the *jusgado* had thinned out generally.

"Yore idee of comin' into Santy Fe has got us in a mess, Northflint," snarled Jake Turner.

"If yuh'd put up a fight in that saloon, so would we, Jack," Bat Storms complained. "What in blazes are we goin' to do now?"

Kid Wolf shrugged, and lighted the cigarette he had rolled from the makings that had been left him. He was curious about the youngest of the party, and was wondering how that murderous youngster would take it. Dave Holly, crouched in the far end of the windowless cell, answered his glance sullenly.

"Yeah!" he spat out. "You was the hombre that was goin' to do so much for us! Yuh sent fer us, had us come all the way up here, to get us hung! Well, yuh'll swing with us!"

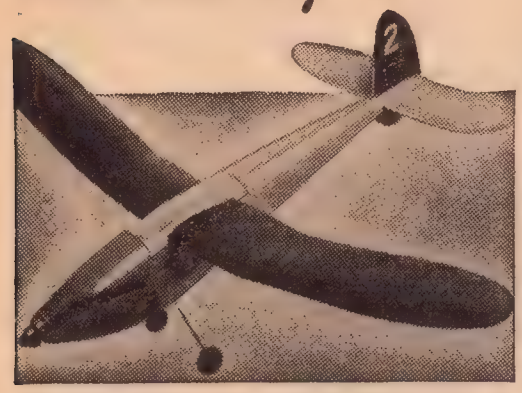
In spite of Dave Holly's toughness, the Texan noted a trembling in his voice, a haunted look in his somber dark eyes. Dave was so young that the Kid felt sorry for him—until he remembered the horrible murder of the white-haired miner. There was something mysterious about this boy. He certainly didn't look like a

They swung the lass ropes over an outjutting sign on one of the store buildings.

criminal, but the Kid had never seen anything crueler or more callous than that evil deed on the trail.

They had been in jail less than half an hour, and the burly sheriff was still making out his report while

Own and Fly . . .



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his stoop-shouldered deputy paced the office floor, when the unexpected happened. It came so suddenly that Kid Wolf was numbed with surprise for a few moments. Storms, Yeager, and Jake Turner gave a great whoop of triumph.

Half a dozen men, masked from the eyes down with red-and-blue bandannas, had come stampeding into the outer room with all the fury and determination of a herd of buffalo. A shot roared out, and the deputy slumped at the knees in the act of drawing his pistol. He slid to the floor, and the sheriff jerked his hands ceilingward. For a minute or two all was smoke, yells, and confusion.

"Yo're the Bat Storms bunch, ain't yuh?" demanded one of the rescuers, coming up to the cell door with a bunch of keys that he'd taken from the sheriff.

"I'm Storms!" Bat yammered excitedly. "Git us out of this!"

The man's breath blew out his handkerchief mask as he laughed, and Kid Wolf had a momentarily glimpse of a thin-lipped, savage mouth and a heavy chin. The lock clicked at the turn of the key, and the steel-barred door swung ajar.

"Come on, all of yuh," invited the leader of the jail-breaking party. "We've even got yore hosses out front, ready for the getaway. Help yoreself to yore guns, boys—on the desk yonder. And don't forget to take the dinero yuh got from the stagecoach. Yuh don't know me? Well, I'm Buckskin Jack Northflint—and it's a good thing for you that I happened to be in town!"

CHAPTER III.

OUTLAWS' HAVEN.

A VOLLEY of gunfire up and down the narrow and crooked San Francisco street had quickly cleared that portion of Santa Fé of the rashly

curious, and citizens both white and brown ducked and scampered for cover. Nobody made a move to stop the five erstwhile prisoners and their six masked rescuers as they thundered northward out of Santa Fe through the deepening dusk.

Kid Wolf galloped with them astride the snow-white Blizzard, not because he wanted to be in the company, but because Yeager and Jake Turner rode with drawn guns. The Kid's gun belts were draped over Bat Storms' saddlehorn.

The outlaws did no talking until they slowed the pace several miles out of town. The real Jack Northflint had lowered his bandanna handkerchief mask, and so had his five companions. Even in the twilight their faces could be distinguished in all their coarse brutality. It seemed to the Kid that he'd jumped right out of the frying pan into sizzling fire!

"How come yuh told us yuh was Jack Northflint, hombre?" Bat Storms snarled at the Texan, when the gang had satisfied themselves that there would be no immediate pursuit.

"If you will remember, mister, I didn't say I was," returned the Kid. "You took it for granted, and I thought it best, under the circumstances not to contradict you."

Buckskin Jack called a halt. "So yuh passed yoreself off as *me*, huh?" he laughed mirthlessly. "Well, who the hell are yuh? Is there any reason," he went on in an edged voice as he cocked his silver-mounted Colt, "why we shouldn't make coyote bait out of yuh right here and now?"

"Yeah, we ort to kill him," Jake Turner glowered. "Bat spouted off to him about the palace job. He knows too blasted much."

Jack Northflint walked his own white horse close to Blizzard and looked searchingly at the Texan. He, too, was wearing a buckskin jacket, but there the resemblance ceased. Northflint was not as tall as the Kid, but he was massively built and a good thirty pounds heavier. He was perhaps thirty years old, and his beady black eyes were set too closely over his crooked beak of a nose.

"What's yore name, feller?" he repeated, and the starlight glittered on the silver of his specially-made six-gun.

"You can call me—Wolf," drawled the Texan, who reserved his first name for his friends alone. His enemies usually learned the why and wherefore of the last one!

Buckskin Jack looked Kid Wolf over with deliberate insolence, and finally his knife-blade lips expanded in an unpleasant smile.

"Yuh look like yuh could handle a pair o' cutters, Wolf," he said after a pause. "We'll be needin' extry gunnies in this job I've planned. I'm goin' to give yuh a chance to throw in with us, and if yuh come through yuh'll get yore share. But I'm warnin' yuh! If yuh try any double-crossin' business I'll blow yore heart out."

"If it was me, I wouldn't trust 'im," growled Yeager under his breath.

"Who said I trusted him?" Northflint barked. "And remember that yo're in my outfit now, and I'm the boss."

"Shall I give Wolf back his guns?" Storms wanted to know.

"Not yet—not until I know more about him," said the outlaw leader, and the cavalcade drummed on again into the pine-scented night.

Under a high, thin wedge of moon they changed their course, veering toward the west, and the country soon became a wilderness of jagged mountains and arroyo-cut valleys

where there were no trails to follow and no guideposts but the remote and twinkling stars. It was a lonely and awesome land, and the shod hoofs of the horses echoed hollowly; the only other sounds were the howlings of hungry coyotes and the mournful cries of night birds in the ghostly cedars.

They traveled for most of the night, but in the wee, small hours they circled down into a hidden basin rimmed by volcanic rock. Here a tiny fire was burning, tended by another member of the gang. This proved to be the hombre named Pete Redondo, who had been acting as a go-between to get the two gangs together. This was only a halfway camp, and not the principal hideout, but there was plenty of food—and whiskey.

"Who's *this* hombre, boss?" Redondo grunted, after he had shaken hands with the Storms' outfit. He was a short, hump-shouldered man with long arms and huge, dangling hands, a typical gunman like the others.

"A recruit," Northflint sneered. "We can use him for somethin', even if it's only for a goat." And he went on to tell Redondo of the happenings in Santa Fe. "As soon as I heard the stage had been high-lined and men nabbed for it I knowed that Bat Storms was jugged," he guffawed. "Bustin' him loose was easy. Say, Bat," he demanded, looking at Dave Holly as if seeing him for the first time, "where did yuh get thisn? Ain't he purty young?"

"I picked him up in a little town near Las Cruces," Storms explained, grinning. "Got him out of a law jam. Don't worry 'bout *his* craw, Jack. Yuh ort to have seen him blow the brains out of one of them stage jaspers. Dave's got plenty snake blood, he has!"

That was something the Texan didn't doubt! There was an expression in the *muchacho's* tragic eyes, however, that perplexed him. He was still thinking about it when he rolled into a blanket later to snatch a little sleep. Escape from this bandit nest was out of the question, as at least half of the bunch remained awake.

Up again just after sunrise, the party of outlaws broke camp and rode northwestward, a dozen strong now, for Redondo accompanied them. The Kid was able now to take better stock of the men who were virtually his captors.

Three of them were Mexicans of the most disreputable sort, Pancho Lopez, and two brothers named Pablo and Pedro Flores, all three being armed with knives as well as six-guns. The other whites were Swifty Leeds and Lefty Bower, the former a quick-moving and shifty-eyed hombre in his midtwenties, and the latter a surly, unshaven desperado who wore an ivory handled Colt at his left hip. Lefty was a gun-tipper, as his open-toed holster swung on a rivet so that he could shoot from the hip without pulling his gun from leather. Altogether it was a dangerous outfit, especially after the Storms bunch had been added to it.

The desperado party forged steadily ahead all that day, and during that grueling ride Kid Wolf heard more details of the contemplated big job, and what he learned was amazing. Stored in the governor's palace on the Santa Fe plaza, it seemed, was gold bullion valued at three hundred thousand dollars. Its presence there was supposed to be a secret.

"We'll have to nab the *oro* before this comin' Thursday," Northflint told Bat Storms. "I figger on Wednesday night."

"Why before Thursday, Jack?"

"They're movin' those gold bars to Denver, and the detachment of soldiers that's to guard it is due in Santa Fe Thursday, so we'll have to beat 'em to it," grinned Buckskin Jack. "They don't think any outsiders savvy about the bullion, so it's practic'ly unguarded now."

"How *you* happen to know about all this?" Storms wanted to know.

Northflint twisted up a cigarette. "That's somethin' I wouldn't even tell *you*, Bat."

Late in the afternoon they were in the great Cochiti upland, an enormous plateau groved with stupendous canyons that formed wedge-shaped mesas which broke off at the river in cliffs a thousand feet high. It was here that the narrow Rio Grande churned amid the rocks, and it was hard for the Kid to believe that this was the same Rio that sprawled so widely on the border of his beloved Texas.

This was Indian country, but the outlaws carefully avoided the red settlements, and at sundown they reached their rendezvous. At this well hidden spot the chalky cliffs of tufa were honeycombed with caves thousands of years old, and in the more convenient of these Jack Northflint had established his headquarters. Down near the river were spare horses in a brush corral.

"All right, lobo, yuh can start makin' yoreself useful!" Northflint snarled at the Texan. "Help the Mexies with the broncs and dish out the grub!"

Kid Wolf was ordered to cut firewood as well, and he did all this without protest. He had plenty of time to think, however, and already his plans were shaping up. No matter what the risk, he would have to escape—and notify the Santa Fé officials of the gang's desperate scheme. Time was short. If he made his getaway, it would have to be within the next thirty-six hours.

CHAPTER IV.

THE WOLF—AND THE STRAY LAMB.

AT nightfall the next evening the Kid made his preparations for his break for freedom. He turned Blizzard out of the corral, knowing that the faithful white cayuse wouldn't stray out of hearing of his whistle. He had also cached his saddle where he could get his hands on it at a moment's notice. The Kid was still without his guns, and he would have to depend upon craft.

He had one other weapon, a bowie knife razor-sharp and needle-pointed. Nobody knew that he had it; even the sheriff had failed to find it when he'd been searched in the Santa Fe jail. The Kid carried it in a sheath sewn inside the collar of his buckskin jacket, so that the tip of its bone handle came below and to the left of his right ear. With that terrible steel fang the Wolf could bite deep!

The gang played monte for a while by the light of the flickering campfire, but Kid Wolf was one of the first to turn in, not to sleep but to watch and await his chance. If no chance came—well, he'd make one!

The fire had been built in the wide opening of one of the caves that had been hollowed out of the soft volcanic pumice. The Kid had purposely made his bed near it, and close by were Yeager, Bat Storms, and Swifty Leeds. Pablo and Pedro Flores, the Mexican brothers, were to stand guard for the first half of the night, and these double sentries would make the Kid's attempt doubly dangerous.

By ten o'clock most of the gang were snoring, but the Kid waited.

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Failure meant death, and there could be no second try. The Flores brothers had received orders from Northflint to keep a special eye on the Texan, and to shoot him upon the slightest provocation.

The night air was sharp and chill at that altitude, and Pedro and Pablo kept the fire burning, feeding it from time to time with fragrant piñon wood. They talked in grunted Spanish, and smoked innumerable corn-shuck cigarettes. Their conversation dealt with the Santa Fe treasure and what dazzling personages they would be when they returned to Mexico with their share of it. Finally, however, Pablo wrapped himself in his green-striped *serape* and dozed. The other remained awake, though, and seemed likely to remain so. He was squatted on his heels at the fire edge.

Kid Wolf had started to edge toward Pedro Flores, an inch at a time, when his trained ears sensed a movement behind him and to his left. Again pretending sleep, the Kid watched through narrowed eyelids.

Uneventful minutes wore by, and then Pedro half turned his back to put fresh wood on the fire. As he did so a dark, slim shape went past the Kid like a pouncing wild cat. It leaped straight for the sentry, and to his surprise the Kid recognized that mysterious youngster Dave Holly. He had his six-shooter in his hand, and just as Pedro spun around he struck him forcibly on the head with the barrel! Out cold, the Mexican slumped to the ground without a sound.

In falling, he had struck his brother's outstretched legs and Pablo Flores, instantly wide awake, sprang to his feet.

"Que es eso? (What is that?) *Mira!"* He had seen Dave, just as he sprinted out of the ruddy circle of firelight. Pablo jerked his Colt from its holster and took aim in the

moonlight. The boy's bounding figure made an excellent target.

Before the sentry could squeeze the trigger, Kid Wolf was upon him like his namesake of the timber! He seized Pablo's gun wrist with the steely fingers of his left hand; a quick twist and it thudded to the ground. At the same time he swung a powerful right into the man's short ribs. Pablo landed with a grunt, a dozen feet away, on his head and shoulders.

"Don't try that, *pelado!*" was the Kid's warning whisper as he saw the Mexican whip a knife from his sash.

But Pablo's arm sped back for the throw, and Kid Wolf ducked low, at the same time drawing and flinging his bowie with one swift motion. It was kill, or be killed, and he would have to do it in silence—the gang would blast him down in an instant if they awakened. Already some were stirring.

The Mexican's throwing knife zoomed past his ear, but his own flashed like quicksilver straight to the mark! Pablo Flores flopped limply to the ground with a strangled gasp. The Texas bowie knife had buried itself in his chest, penetrating the heart.

Seeing that Flores was finished, the Kid pulled him out of the circle of firelight, recovered his bowie and gingerly returned to the cave. He had already spotted his guns—Bat Storms had them, belts and all, and was using them for a pillow. The dead Mexican's slugged brother was already recovering his senses, and knowing that the gang would soon be swarming after him anyhow, the Kid took the risk of recovering his Peacemakers. He jerked his weapons from beneath Storms' head, then dashed into the open just as the bandit hide-out came to life!

Picking up his saddle, he ran down toward the corral, whistling a signal to Blizzard. It would be a minute or so, he knew, before Northflint and his crew could grasp what had happened, minutes more before any pursuit could be organized.

In answer to his call, Blizzard came drifting out of the piñon trees like a white phantom, and it was but the work of a moment for the Kid to slip on the bridle and cinch up the hull. He was doing this when he saw a horse and rider leaving the brush corral. It was Dave Holly. He pounded up alongside, just as the Texan mounted.

"Let's go from here, Wolf!" he panted. "You lead the way!"

They lost no time, for red spangles of flame were already bursting about the cave entrance, and with the roar of the wildly aimed shots came enraged yells from the outlaws. A bullet ricocheted from the rocks only a few yards from the Kid as he urged his snowy cayuse into a gallop. He headed due west along the watercourse, and Dave Holly, riding hard, was just behind him.

After a mile or so, when the silence of the wilderness had closed around them again, the Kid picked a rocky spot where he would leave no tracks, and entered the shallow, swift waters of the stream. Then they backtrailed for some distance, left the river at another stony point, and swung southeastward toward distant Santa Fe. From that time on the Kid was careful to leave as faint a trail as possible.

They progressed at a steady pace until the east began to turn pale ahead of them, and without exchanging more than half a dozen words. But Kid Wolf's curiosity finally broke the ice.

"We might have captured the whole bunch if we'd worked together, *muchacho,*" he said, slackening Bliz-

zard's speed so that Holly's claybank bronc could recover its wind. "I didn't know you wanted to get free of that outfit."

Dave Holly's sharp little face was pale in the half light of dawn. "I wasn't shore of yuh, Wolf, or I'd have told yuh. I been pinin' to get away from Bat Storms for a long time, but I was scared."

"You mean you were with Storms against your will?" the Texan asked in surprise.

Dave was silent for a while. "Not at first, I wasn't," he confessed. "Back in my home town—well, I'd swiped a saddle and got into a peck o' trouble. Storms, an' Yeager, an' Turner helped me make a getaway from it, and they said an outlaw's life was velvet. They asked me would I join 'em, and like a fool, I did. I held their hosses for 'em at a holdup they pulled, and then I was scared of the law and Storms both. I had to pretend to be tough —I'm not really—" The young ranny's voice ended in a sort of choked-up sob.

"And so you are not *really*," said Kid Wolf very grimly.

Dave wiped his mouth with his shirt sleeve and his eyes were wet. "No, I ain't, Wolf. I made a mistake once, not savvyin' any better, but I couldn't kill—like they do."

He sounded sincere, but the effrontery of his statement stunned the Texan. "Have you forgot what you done on the trail above Santa Fé?" he gasped. "You deliberately murdered—"

"Yuh mean that ol' man? I didn't kill him," Dave Holly said.

"Why, I saw you with my own eyes!" cried the amazed Texan.

For the first time since the Kid had known him a smile softed the wizened features of Dave Holly. He took his Colt six-gun from its holster and handed it across. "See fer yoreself," he insisted. "It's what I shot that miner with. Yuh see, Wolf, them skunks would have kilt the man if I didn't offer to do it myself. I done it to save his life. Thar ain't no lead in them ca'tridges, yuh'll notice; just powder stoppered with shotgun waddin'. When I shot him in the head I aimed just above him. It stunned him, I reckon, and the gang figgered he was dead."

The Kid inspected the boy's gun and was convinced. Dave had made sure that he would commit no murders by doctoring his shells. The Kid understood, now, that tragic and mournful look that he had seen in Dave's dark eyes.

"You'll go straight from now on, *amigo*," he said gently. "Yo've had your lesson. Have you got any folks, Dave?"

The other nodded, swallowing hard. "Mom and dad have got a little place close to Yuccaville," he said miserably. "I ain't fit ever to go back, I reckon, Wolf."

"Just call me Kid." The gray-eyed Texan smiled. "And as fo' goin' home, we'll see about that after we've done our duty in Santa Fe."

"We're goin' to tell the gov'nor about Northflint's scheme?" Dave gulped. "It's . . . it's what I hoped yuh'd say, Kid. Thet town will be mighty hot for us, though. We may be shot on sight. Do yuh think the gang is on our trail?"

The Kid thought not, and said so, for he was confident that his maneuvering had thrown Northflint off the track. As this was Tuesday and as the robbery had been planned for Wednesday night, the gang surely wouldn't waste time in chasing them.

"Yuh'd better load up that gun of yours with real bullets now, Dave,"

Continued on page 109

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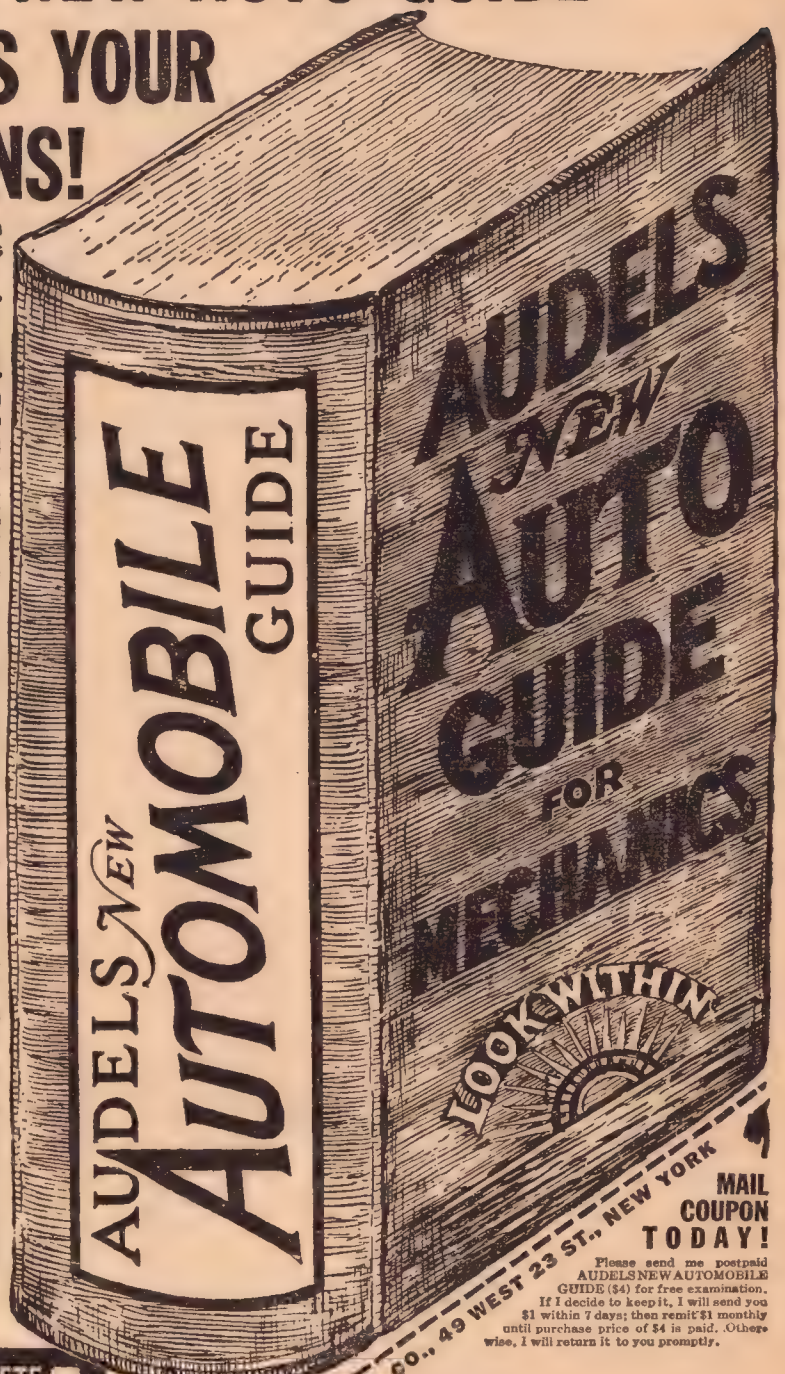

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Continued from page 106

he drawled. "If you do any more shootin' it's goin' to be on the side of the law!"

They pushed on again at an increased speed, headed always southeast, and threading their way through innumerable lonely canyons. The Kid whistled his favorite tune, "The Rio," and he fashioned a new stanza for the song:

"We take care of the strays down in Texas, the Rio!
The po' dogies who've roamed from their maws;
And the rascals to blame for their sorrow and shame
Get the hangman's knot under their jaws!"

After hearing Dave's story, Kid Wolf was more than ever determined that the gang be brought to justice Then he would see to it that young Holly was reclaimed from the life he had blundered into.

The Kid was known throughout the West as the Soldier of Misfortune and the name fitted. He had always been a friend of the underdog and had taken the side of the weak and oppressed against the strong and unprincipled men who exploited them. And he had brought law to many a frontier where none had existed before. Kid Wolf Law!

At about ten o'clock they halted for a rest of a few hours to spare their horses, choosing a grassy meadow fed by cold water springs. Dave's claybank dun was much fagged, but Blizzard hadn't turned a hair during the long grind. Both animals got a rubdown, and took it easy for a while. The Soldier of Misfortune and Dave Holly kept a careful lookout while the animals were grazing. Then in the early afternoon they rode on toward their destination.

It was after sundown when they reached Santa Fe—and trouble!

CHAPTER V.

"STRING 'EM UP!"

IN a severely furnished room in the Palace of the Governors, dimly lighted by wax tapers in a bronze candelabrum, Kid Wolf and Dave Holly were having an unpleasant and far from satisfactory interview with the high-ups of the New Mexican Territorial government. They had succeeded in entering the town in a roundabout way without being observed and recognized, but obtaining an audience with Governor Jephtha Johnson hadn't been easy. Both had been required to check their guns at the entrance, and now the Kid was getting more and more uneasy.

Kid Wolf had insisted that the conversation be private, but Jephtha Johnson's secretary—or adjutant—had to be present, and half a dozen other officials were within call.

"Your story, Mr. Wolf, is incredible," said the governor, a lean, white-mustached man in a strictly formal black cutaway. His long fingers drummed the desk top and he fixed a penetrating glance on his two visitors. "But if what you say is true—"

"But it *isn't* true, yore excellency," protested the adjutant bitterly. "Don't let yourself be taken in by such a wild yarn! This is just a trap of some kind, take my word for it!"

The adjutant's name was Pickering, and he was an insolent, hawk-eyed hombre of forty, expensively dressed and self-important. He seemed to have taken an instant and violent dislike to the Soldier of Misfortune, and his opinions seemed to carry much weight, unfortunately, with the governor.

"What I can't understand is how this Northflint, if that's his name, learned of the bullion." Jephtha Johnson frowned. "How could the

news about the gold have leaked out, after we took such pains to keep it secret?"

"Information of that kind gets out sooner or later—and of course it came from the other end," Pickering growled. "Anyway, the soldiers will be here day after tomorrow. The gold is safe enough. We've got other things to take care of, Jephtha—and here's where I do it." He went to the doorway and shouted through. "Fetch Carson over here!" he ordered sharply.

"But, Pickering—" the governor started to protest.

The adjutant bit the end of a cigar and lighted it from one of the candles. "Mr. Wolf is raisin' a tempest in a teapot, as the sayin' goes," he sneered. "He hoped he'd square himself that way, so we'd forget all about the stage robbery and jailbreak. Well, it's not goin' to work!"

Kid Wolf and Dave Holly exchanged perplexed glances. The Kid had almost forgotten that the authorities believed he had taken part in the stagecoach massacre. And proving his innocence of that was going to be difficult, if not impossible.

He was still racking his brain for a solution of his difficulties when Carson entered the room, accompanied by several other hombres. Carson was the sheriff! He gave a yelp of satisfaction at the sight of Kid Wolf and Dave.

"Well, damn my eyes! Here's *two* of 'em, anyhow!" he jubilated. "Bust out o' jail and kill my deputy, will they! They won't *this* time! Grab 'em, men!"

The Kid saw that it would be a waste of breath to protest his innocence then. It seemed that he and Dave had risked their lives for nothing, and he made a last appeal to Governor Johnson.

"I've told you the truth, sir, and did what I thought was my duty," he said slowly. "Jail us if you like—we can't help ourselves, I reckon—but keep a special watch tomorrow night for Northflint. He means business, and he'll murder."

"Take him and the younker away, Carson," ordered the adjutant with a cynical laugh. "And *this* time I hope yuh'll post a strong guard at the jail so there'll be no more rescues!"

The Kid stared speechlessly at Pickering, amazed at the man's stupidity—or was it *more* than denseness? But there was no help for it; he had done his best, and if the government wanted its bullion stolen, well and good! The governor seemed to be placing for too much confidence in that adjutant of his.

Surrounded by the angry sheriff's men, Kid Wolf and Dave Holly were marched out of the ancient adobe palace and across the plaza, cursed at every step by the indignant Carson. The Texan's request that their horses be cared for was grudgingly granted, but it was plain that the sheriff regarded his two prisoners as a couple of mad dogs.

"I saw that stagecoach the other day," he growled as they entered the jail building. "It was a sight I'll never forget! Yuh'll get an early trial, and I'm so sure yuh'll hang that I'm goin' to commission the carpenters to build the gallows without waitin' for authority to do so."

Once more the cheerless steel-barred door of the Santa Fe calaboose clanged behind Dave Holly and the Soldier of Misfortune. This time, it seemed, to stay. And wearied from their exhausting ride they fell supperless to sleep.

In the morning Kid Wolf felt a little more cheerful in spite of their predicament, and he was able to think

things over in a clearer light. Dave, though, was much depressed and could scarcely eat the coarse breakfast or drink the black coffee that was pushed in at them.

"We shoulda made our own gitaway, Kid, and let 'em worry about their own gold," he said moodily. "And mebbe if I'd stuck to the gang and—"

"Don't get that idea in your noggin, *muchacho,*" the Texan advised.

"That stump-headed gov'nor and all his outfit deserve what's comin' to 'em!" Dave said bitterly as he paced the dreary cell.

"That Pickering hombre is the jasper I don't understand," mused the Texan. "Somethin' tells me he's a wrong un. He was a little too anxious not to believe us."

Dave put his lips close to his friend's ear. "You still got that knife, Kid?"

"Yes, but it won't do us much good in here."

There was some comfort, though, in knowing that the officers' search had once again missed that well-hidden bowie. Although it couldn't dig out of this place of stone and steel it might be useful as a last resort, if only to intimidate a jailer. The Kid had nothing against Carson nor any of his men. They were only doing their thick-headed duty.

At noon they were served with a good-enough meal of frijoles and tortillas, and the wearisome day dragged along somehow. The Kid couldn't forget, though, that this was Thursday and that the robbery had been planned for that very night, and his tension increased. For the third or fourth time he asked to talk to Carson, to the governor—to anyone—but as he expected, he was contemptuously refused.

"Save yore story fer the trial, hombre," the sheriff barked at him.

The jail was on one of the streets near the plaza, and the Kid could tell when the *siesta* time was over

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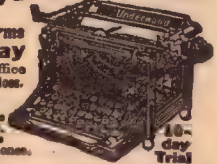

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by the renewed sounds from outside as darkness approached. Hoofs *clip-clopped* past, wheels rumbled, and there was much stir and activity until the lamp was lighted in Carson's office outside the cell. Then he heard the twanging of a guitar from somewhere, and the gay laughter of a señorita.

"Tonight was supposed to be the night," young Holly muttered, after the frugal supper had been disposed of.

Kid Wolf had thrown himself philosophically on one of the iron bunks. He rolled and lighted a cigarette with the last of his makings and nodded. There was a chance, of course, that the Northflint-Storms outfit had given up their plans for the Santa Fe raid, owing to the fact that he and Holly had escaped with information. It was a toss-up.

Dave was standing with his hands clenched to the door bars. "Kid, I think I hear 'em now!" he cried. "Listen! Somethin' is up, that's shore!"

Dave was right; something was amiss in Santa Fe, for the Texan heard a confused hubbub in the direction of the plaza. There was a great deal of shouting, an indistinct roar that seemed to be coming louder and closer. The whole thing blended into something that sounded like a hundred coyotes in full cry. It was something that Holly had never heard before, but the Kid knew what it meant. It wasn't the bandit raid that was creating all the uproar. It was a lynching mob!

There were two guards in the other office and they, too, knew the significance of that menacing avalanche of sound. The Kid saw them hurry to the door, rifles in hand.

"What's the matter, Kid? What does it mean?" Holly gulped, his thin face whitening.

Kid Wolf didn't need to tell him. They could see the crowd now that was surging on the sidewalks and

roadway of the narrow street in front of the calaboose. It was increasing rapidly, and although it fell back a little at the threat of the guards' rifles it surged forward again with yells and catcalls.

"String 'em up! Git them two skunks that murdered the stage folks! Turn them cusses over to us!" were some of the cries, and there were dozens of others in both Spanish and English. "We want them men, Carson, and we mean to have 'em!"

"Carson ain't back from supper," one of the deputies told them helplessly. "Now listen, men, this ain't accordin' to law—"

"What *they* done wasn't 'cordin' to law, neither!" yelled somebody illogically. "Come on, boys!"

They pushed right on into the jail office, and the two sentries yelled protests but fell back. They could hardly do otherwise, for dozens more were at the heels of the ringleaders. The place was literally jammed with excited, vociferous citizens. One of them had a pair of noosed ropes over his arm. Something, or somebody, had certainly stirred Santa Fe to a frenzy.

And then the Kid learned who that somebody was! Among the foremost of the mob was a hawkish-eyed hombre that he recognized. Pickering! Surprising, ordinarily, to see a government official taking a part in an illegal hanging! But the Kid wasn't astonished. He'd been putting two and two together.

"Give us the key to that cell, Kibberton!" a whiskery cattleman demanded of one of the two deputies. "We won't get rough with you fellers onless we have to. All we want is to see justice done."

Pickering was too clever to do any of the actual business himself, but it was plain enough to the Kid that he had egged on the others. He was silent, sardonically smiling.

"We meet again, mister," greeted the Texan, catching the official's eye.

The governor's adviser showed his teeth. "Wolf meat seems to be going up, from all indications," he laughed.

The Kid vowed there that he'd find a mark for that bowie of his before the end came!

He was glad to see how Dave was taking it. Young Holly was pale, his legs were shaking under him, but he wasn't cowering in the face of this violent and merciless disaster. He gripped Kid Wolf's hand just as the rioters wrenched away the guard's keys and came streaming into the opened cell. A moment more and both were struggling in the unreasoning fury of the mob.

Although fighting was useless, the Kid had the satisfaction of sending two or three men sprawling, lashing out at them with long, hard-socking rights and lefts. So terrific were his punches that the mob fell back a little. The Kid hoped to get to Pickering, but that hombre was smart enough to keep plenty of men between him and the Texan. Another breath and the rabid pack closed in again. The two prisoners were dragged through the jail office and into the packed street, fighting fruitlessly but furiously at every step.

Kid Wolf was sorry for Dave. The younker's face was streaming with crimson from a dozen blows and scratches, his hair was disheveled and he was blubbering and crying, not from terror but from hopeless rage. "Yuh crazy fools—let me—"

"All right, get those ropes around their necks," the Kid heard Pickering say quietly, but by the time the Kid's arms were piñoned and he

couldn't get at his bowie. The end was near.

Over one of the store buildings near the jail was an outjutting signboard, held by iron brackets. The ends of the ropes were thrown over this, a dozen pairs of willing hands catching hold.

"Think it'll hold their weights?" somebody wanted to know. "Mebbe we'd better pull 'em up one at a time."

Pickering was taking a more active part now. "It'll hold," he said impatiently. "We've already taken too much time."

Kid Wolf lifted his voice above the uproar, not to plead for their lives—that was useless—but to present the facts to the mob as far as possible:

"I've a few words to say, if yo'll give me a minute, gents! This man Pickering—"

"Heave on those ropes!" Pickering shouted in a furious voice.

"Hold on! Hold on!" sang out someone at the edge of the milling crowd. "You men are makin' a terrible mistake! Don't hang these hombres! They're not guilty!"

CHAPTER VI.

DEATH IN THE ADOBE PALACE.

FORCING its way slowly through the fringe of the mob was a buggy drawn by two big black horses. The vehicle was occupied by Governor Jephtha Johnson and Sheriff Carson. Neither of these men, however, had given voice to the cry that had caused the lynchers to pause. A white-haired old miner was hustling forward, elbowing right and left. The Kid's pulses gave a bound when he recognized the hombre. It was the one that Dave had "murdered" during the stage robbery.

"Let 'im through!" several voices chorused. "It's ol' Mike Frisbie. What's that yuh say, Mike? You know anything about this?" Other voices answered: "He was the only jasper tuh escape from the coach killin'—th' only survivor. Let's hear what he has to say."

"These fellers ain't guilty!" the old man cried shrilly. "By gorries, *I* ort to know!"

"Yo're loco, Frisbie!" Pickering tried to cut in, but he was yelled down.

"That gang o' killers made that thar feller in buckskins pris'ner while I was still in the Concord!" Frisbie stated positively as he pointed at Kid Wolf. "He wasn't one of 'em. I was layin' in the coach skeered half to death, but I savvy *that* much! But that younker thar, he *was* one of 'em!"

"Then let's string *him* up!" roared the mob, thirsty for one victim at least.

"Hold on, I say!" the old man said authoritatively. "The young un saved my life." He showed them the welt on his temple and briefly old them how he'd received it. His words carried conviction to most. "All I got was a powder burn—and the boy had orders to brain me."

"Mebbe he *tried* to kill yuh—" one of the lynchers started to object, but he was interrupted by the sheriff. The governor had worked the team very close now.

"The story all checks!" Carson bellowed. "It agrees with what the prisoners said. So disperse, all of yuh! Go to yore homes!"

Jephtha Johnson stood up in the buggy and the yellow light from the nearby saloon windows outlined his impressive figure.

"You men have made a mistake, that's all," he said mildly. "Now do what Carson said and go home. And thank God that you've been pre-

vented, in time, from hanging innocent men."

The mob had already began to break up, and men were slipping off sheepishly in all directions. Dave Holly, who had faced death without flinching just a few minutes before, nearly collapsed now. Kid Wolf, too, felt the reaction, and his knees seemed weak. Both were able to thank Frisbie, though, for his timely intercession. Pickering had been one of the first of the lynchers to sneak away.

"Jump into the buggy, Wolf, and you, too, Holly!" Governor Johnson invited as he drove up to the hitch rack. "I want to apologize in the name of the Territory for—"

Dave and the Kid did so, getting in behind, for the vehicle was really a sort of buckboard with a top over the front.

"Never mind apologizin', sir," said the Soldier of Misfortune. "Drive pronto to the Palace! Have you men there that you can depend on?"

"Yes, but—"

"Hurry as fast as you can, sir!" snapped the Kid. "That lynchin' was just put on to attract everyone's attention away from your store of bullion!"

With an exclamation of startled understanding Governor Johnson whipped up his team, and the vehicle surged forward to the corner of the plaza and rattled around the turn on two wheels.

To the Kid's relief it was still quiet about the long, low, adobe Palace and the wide plaza. They were still in time, it seemed, though he had the feeling that the storm might break loose at any instant. Johnson pulled up at the Palace hitch rail and they piled out. The sheriff was trying to explain his absence from the jail at the time of the attempted lynching.

"I was sent away on a fake call, and I'm shore sorry I was so took in," he said. "Pickering—"

"I *thought* he was behind it," said the Texan grimly. "Let's hurry in. If my guns are here I'd like to have them, sir."

As they passed the fortress-thick walls of the portal, the governor hurried into an anteroom and returned with Kid Wolf's cartridge belts and Peacemakers. He had Holly's gun also, and handed them over with apologies.

"Where is the strong room?" the Kid demanded.

"Down this corridor and to the right," gaped Jephtha Johnson. "But why—"

"I think it would be a good idea if we'd look it over!"

The Kid led the way, not because he was familiar with the interior of the ghostly old edifice, but because neither Johnson nor Carson were moving fast enough for him. The halls were dimly lit by lamps of wrought iron, and grotesque shadows wavered after them as they moved along.

They turned the corner, with the Kid still in the lead, entering another narrow corridor. At the end of this passageway a bright light was burning—and men were at work. Johnson gave a cry of angry dismay.

"Why—what does this mean? Pickering, what are you—"

The rusty iron door of the strong room stood ajar, and three men were bringing out small but very heavy ingots of a dull yellow color. Several had already been stacked outside on the flagstones of the passage.

Pickering whirled about, holding a drawn six-gun. At the sight of the Kid, his vicious, sardonic face jerked convulsively. His hollow laugh

echoed up the corridor. He had the drop.

"Up with your hands, damn yuh all!" he ordered savagely. "And you, Wolf—drop those gun belts!"

The Texan hadn't yet buckled his belts about him, but was still holding his holstered .45s, apparently carelessly enough. And at Pickering's order he *did* drop them. As he let them fall, however, one thumb flicked a gun hammer.

There was a red star of exploding fire, a deafening explosion and a hot gust of blue smoke.

Pickering fell spraddle-legged on his toes and hands. He looked up at the Kid from this absurd position, an expression of stupid astonishment on his graying face, then flattened to the floor, pawing feebly at the gun that had slithered from his fingers. A cough, and he was still.

The two hombres who had been working with the treacherous official were regular palace guards, and their carbines stood in a corner. As Pickering went down they began yelling explanations.

"He gave us the orders! Mr. Pickering unlocked the strong room, and told us to carry out the gold, so we thought it was all right, naturally!"

"Yo're not to blame, I reckon," the Kid shrugged as he picked up his holstered guns. The odor of powder and burned leather was strong in the passageway.

Jephtha Johnson seemed stunned by this revelation. "I . . . I never would have figured Pickering—"

"He was the hombre that furnished Buckskin Jack Northflint with the info about the gold," said the Texan decisively. "He couldn't very well have got away with all that weight, himself. And that's why we can expect the Northflint-Storms outfit any minute."

Sheriff Carson's wheezy breathing stopped for a minute. "Wolf, I believe yo're right!" he blurted after a moment's pause. "Yuh hear that? I believe them bandits are here right now!"

CHAPTER VII.

BULLETS AT MIDNIGHT.

THEY had left the doors open as they passed along, otherwise they wouldn't have been able to hear, through the tremendously thick walls of the Palace of Governors, the sounds that now reached them. To their ears came the faint but unmistakable tattoo of horses' feet in full gallop.

"If I could get some men together I'd—" Carson gasped.

"No time for that now, I'm afraid," said the Texan grimly. "We'll have to stand them off ourselves. *Back to the front, pronto!*"

They had the two guards to help them, at any rate, and both had their .50-caliber Sharps carbines and twenty rounds of ammunition. According to Johnson, there was a supply of extra cartridges and guns in his office. The first thing to do, though, was reach the scene of action. If the gang ever succeeded in getting inside the Palace, the battle would be lost.

"We've got to fight 'em away from the doors and windows, amigos!" cried the Soldier of Misfortune as they rushed toward the front of the old fortress. "And it's kill or *be* killed. They're worse than a pack of mad coyotes!"

There were several doors at the portion of the structure that faced the plaza, but all except two of these had long been closed with iron-reinforced oaken doors, and most of the windows were likewise guarded. The gang, of course, hoped to force their way in by a quick surprise attack.

The square plaza in front was

lighted by a pale moon, and several deserted and silent freighters were drawn up under the trees there. There was no movement anywhere, at first, that they could see, but before they could get fairly organized there was plenty of it!

"Thar they are!" Dave Holly said with a sharp intake of breath.

The Storms-Northflint cavalcade had just entered the plaza from the west, and they were approaching the government building as confidently as if they were already assured of their success. Seven . . . eight . . . nine—all were present, and already they were dragging their rifles from their saddle scabbards.

"Let 'em get up close," the Kid advised.

"But . . . but if we closed and barricaded the doors and windows they couldn't get in," stammered the governor. "They'd see that it was hopeless, and leave before the whole town was aroused! Hadn't we better—"

"Do you want these men punished, sir?" demanded the Texan. "You mean that we shouldn't fight?"

"Wolf is right," said the sheriff stanchly. He cocked his big Colt six-shooter. "Here's whar *I* get a chance to correct a few of my mistakes!"

It was after midnight now, and Santa Fe was wrapped in quiet. The raiders had slowed their horses to a walk and were coming up to the hitch rail in front of the Palace. Evidently they thought that Pickering would have a golden hand-out ready for them.

"Surrender!" Kid Wolf sang out icily. "Yo're right under our guns!"

Northflint and several others were already on the ground. The Kid could see Buckskin Jack's evil face freeze tense in the moonlight. His hand sped toward his thigh. With his left he was holding his rifle.

"Wolf! Why, yuh—"

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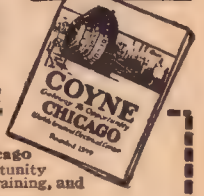

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All the rest was smothered in thunder! A sheet of lurid flame leaped from the doorway of the governor's palace, answered by stabbing, orange-red spurts from the dozen-odd guns of the outlaws.

Jack Northflint staggered and dropped his rifle; he'd been hit in the shoulder. Pancho Lopez and Tobe Yeager were even more unlucky. The former tumbled into the shallow ditch with a bullet in his brain, and Yeager sagged down with his murderous heart smashed forever. Bandit slugs slammed ineffectually into the thick walls of the Palace, doing little more than raise a dust. A few zipped venomously through the doorways, but none of the defenders was hit. Dave and the two sentries were guarding one of these and Kid Wolf, Sheriff Carson, and the governor had stationed themselves at the principal one.

"Rush 'em!" shouted Northflint, who hadn't been badly wounded. "We cain't stop at this stage of the game! Git that Wolf hombre—"

Pete Redondo's horse became unmanagable, and several others were bucking and rearing, but the outlaws were on their feet now, having cast all caution to the winds. They were going to risk everything on this last turn of the cards.

"Keep back, governor," warned the Kid, who saw that Jeptha Johnson wasn't much accustomed to gun showdowns. "I think we can stop 'em."

The bandits made their rush. It was a furious one, and at the same time methodical, for these hombres weren't new at the game of death. All were experienced gun fighters, professional killers accustomed to this science of killing. But they were fighting only for gold bars, while the Kid and his companions were battling for life, and justice.

Kid Wolf ducked low, bending his long, powerful body at the knees, a Colt .45 in each brown hand. He

was right in the main doorway, ready for what was coming.

"Shoot to kill!" he said, his voice losing its drawl and taking on a metallic snarl.

When the gang charged, most of them drove toward the Texan's station. They came with their guns blazing, and the sharper explosions of the carbines and rifles rose above the steady thunderous drumming of Colts. The range was less than fifteen yards, at most, and soon it was practically point-blank. At that distance, in spite of the half darkness, it was almost impossible to miss. Gunfire shook the plaza and the old Palace, wave upon wave of it.

Swifty Leeds would be swift no longer; he lurched, hung with both hands to the hitch-rail bar for a moment, then thudded to the ground. The remaining Flores brother stumbled across him—and paused drunkenly at the edge of the sidewalk, as if trying to digest the leaden pellets that had caught him at the waistline. He fell, writhing and screeching like a sick cat.

Dave and the two Palace sentries repulsed *their* share of the outlaws, wounding Bat Storms, who came lurching to join Northflint. Pete Redondo was stretched out in front of that doorway, dying.

Kid Wolf staggered into the wall as the shock of a bullet turned him half around. He'd been hit somewhere, in the shoulder he thought—but again his Peacemakers crashed—and again.

The oaths of the bandits rose amid the gunfire. "Make a break for it!" Storms shrilled. "We ain't got no show—"

"After them!" panted the Texan, sidling out into the plaza at a crouch.

They were carrying the fight to the outlaws now! And like a pack of cornered rats, Northflint and his surviving henchmen turned to show their teeth, and empty their guns. They probably realized that they had lost all—their broncs had bolted, most of them, and the others were out of reach.

There was a groan from Sheriff Carson, and the Kid felt him go down under the impact of a slug. Lefty Bower, the gun-tipper, had whirled on the Kid and was closing in almost at arm's length. His holstered Colt, on its pivot, rocketed red flame.

"Yuh got that damned Wolf!" Storms yammered, but the Texan had only crouched closer, and Bower's bullet went scorching under his armpit. The Kid's guns belched fire in return. They dropped Lefty in his tracks and then touched Bat Storms with their hot, death-dealing fingers.

Storms tumbled into the roadway, landing flat on his back. He drew his knees up comfortably as if preparing for a long sleep—as indeed he was! His mouth opened wide, his eyes went glassy, and sightless, under the moon.

In the meanwhile, Dave Holly had come out of the Palace like a small ghost to capture and disarm Buckskin Jack Northflint and Jake Turner, both of whom were badly wounded. The Battle of the Bullion, as it was afterward remembered in Santa Fe, was finished.

In a couple of days Kid Wolf and Dave Holly were ready to make their departure from the old capital. The Kid's wound hadn't healed, but it was so slight that the Texan deemed it not worth bothering about.

One of the Palace sentries had been killed in the fight, but Sheriff Carson was already on the road to recovery. Dave and the Kid had stopped in to see their old "enemy" before leaving, and now they were saying adios to Jephtha Johnson.

"I suppose you know how much

you've saved the Territory—in money, I mean?" The governor smiled as he shook hands with them. "Thank heaven, that gold is on the way to Denver now, under army escort! I think a reward is due—"

The Kid's gray eyes glinted. "All I ask is that Northflint and the other gunny get the same swift justice here that was promised Dave and me," he laughed. "But speakin' of rewards, sir, there *is* somethin' I want to ask you."

"Name it, and if it's within my power—"

"It's within your power, all right, sir. You see, I'm goin' to see that Dave gets home safely, see that he gets a new start in life. There's a small scrape he got in down Cruces way—nothin' serious, but if he had your official pardon—"

"Nothing I'd rather give him!" cried Johnson heartily. "I'll send the papers—"

"Beg your pahdon, sir, but I'll wait right heah while you sign 'em," drawled the Soldier of Misfortune. "You see, I savvy somethin' about red tape, and I'm takin' no chances."

The governor chuckled, and made out the necessary pardon while Kid Wolf rolled and smoked a brown quirly.

"Thanks, sir, and goodby," said the Kid with a courteous bow.

Jephtha Johnson followed them to the door of the ancient Palace of the Governors, watched them as they swung aboard their horses and waved his hat with mingled emotions as they drummed across the plaza. Kid Wolf was singing something, and unless the governor's ears deceived him, it was this:

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Where the brandin' fire smokes in the scrubby oaks,
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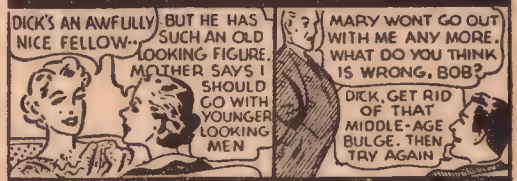

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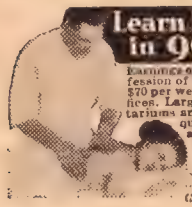

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Corner and there wasn't any Range Boss. We had a plumb steep upward trail in those days, but plenty of our traveling party got to the top.

That sets us to wondering if all of you folks who want to write are taking full advantage of your opportunity. Of course, there's a limit to what we can buy each week, but your chances are just as good as the next fellow's; it's all up to you. We don't care what your name is or where you hail from; if we think your work stands out at the weekly roundup, you'll draw one of our checks, with Uncle Sam's dinero waiting to be swapped for it.

Now just a word about how your work's judged. No, we don't have any board of judges wrangling over it any more. Your Range Boss judges it himself by the very same standards we take stories from professionals in the main part of 3W. We read everything that can be read; don't worry, we'll give you the squarest deal we can. Don't forget that we've been through the mill several times, and we never found any substitute for the Golden Rule.

Well, amigos, here goes again. Is your name in among the lucky ones? We sure hope so.

SIX-GUN RAIN

By Charles Rowan—Age 29
Oakland, California

Old Goober Jackson rocked stoically in the shade of the Almirante Hotel and studied the angry young puncher.

"There's a time fer gittin' het up, and there's a time fer restin' yore brain pan," the oldster said softly. "Ain't no use a-shoutin' at me jist 'cause Joe Godey cain't see you as a fittin' mate for his only daughter."

Jim Planter stared glumly at the ground. His rugged features softened as he said: "Mary Lou could've talked him into it if this drought hadn't come along. He's sore because the pasturin's bad."

Goober rocked a minute before he said: "Godey's a gambler, Jim. S'posin' you just mosey over to the Silver Bell where Godey's at right now and lay down five

hundred smackers it'll rain afore the sun sets."

The waddy looked at him disgustedly. "That's smart advice, ain't it?" he demanded angrly, "when you know I ain't got a cent." He stared at the hot blue sky. "The water in thet sky wouldn't water a mosquito."

Goober pulled out a well-stuffed wallet and offered a number of bills to the young puncher.

"It's safe enough," he said gruffly, as the young man hesitated. "Make Godey bet you a job on the Circle B and a chance to spark Mary Lou. He's a gambler, and he'll take it."

Jim couldn't guess what lay in old Goober's mind, but he took the money. "It'll be yore loss, Goober, but thanks." He turned toward the Silver Bell.

At four o'clock, young Jim Planter leaned against a hitching post and stared moodily at the blue sky. Godey, after one look at the sky, had snapped up the bet.

A sneering voice caused Jim to stiffen and turn, hands loose at his sides. Jed Ranford, Godey's hulking foreman, grinned crookedly at him.

"Ain't prayin' fer rain, Planter? Seems you must 'a' got a little windfall. Plunkin' down five hundred smackers jist fer a chance at that little—"

Ranford's gun leaped from its holster as Jim's did, but the foreman's shot went wild as a slug from Jim's gun struck him in the forehead. With a look of stupid amazement, the Circle G man sagged to the ground.

Jim felt a hand on his shoulder. It was Godey. "Thanks, son," the Circle G owner said. "I'd 'a' killed the skunk myself if you hadn't. I heard what he said. Why, he was a-countin' on marryin' my Mary Lou!"

For the first time, Jim noticed that the sunshine had disappeared. Black clouds were rolling from the west.

"She'll be rainin' afore night," Joe Godey roared, "an' I ain't hatin' to lose that bet. You git over an' see that Mary Lou ain't out in the wet, son."

Jim hurried to return Goober's money. "Don't know how you guessed it, Pop," he shouted, as he leaped on his waiting horse, "but rain she does." The big bay headed for the Circle G.

Goober looked after the disappearing figure. A sudden twinge in his leg caused him to grimace, then grin.

"Rheumatiz is mighty handy at times," he murmured. "It most allus foretells rain."

In this story, the rheumatism of old Goober is very well planted for the surprise that comes when he reveals the secret of his accurate weather forecasting. Planting your surprise well is very important for you amateurs, and Señor Rowan has furnished you with a good example. The story is light and semihumorous, so the rheumatism goes here, but wouldn't in a more serious yarn. The same goes for the plot, which also is light. Goober's character is in keeping with his part in the story, so we can't find anything to bellyache about there.

Give us plenty of these light, humorous stories, pards. We like 'em. Who doesn't?

Here's:

THE RUNT GREW UP

By James M. Spencer—Age 19
Hensonville, New York

From the interior of the Batwing Saloon came sounds of flesh meeting flesh and piteous cries. Then the swinging doors were thrown mightily open, and a skinny kid came flying out to land with a crash.

The kid's shirt was torn to ribbons and huge red welts appeared on the bare flesh. His face was battered beyond recognition and one arm hung limp by his side. He was not more than sixteen, small and undernourished. With an effort he climbed to his feet and glared at the man who had beaten him so cruelly.

The man was a giant in size, had a black matted beard and beady eyes set close together. He stood looking at the boy with a leering grin on his face.

"Now yuh get out of here, yuh meddlesome little runt! I won't be so easy on yuh next time," he thundered.

Peering at his tormentor with one partially opened eye, Tip Logan spoke low and deadly.

"Yo're goin' to pay for this, Biff Wilson, and yo're goin' to pay plenty. I'll be back tuh get yuh some day."

With laughter and jeers following him, Tip mounted his horse and rode out of town without a backward glance.

Six years later, a stranger dismounted in front of the Batwing. He was tall and heavily built, with powerful steellike muscles. Dressed in ordinary cowboy garb, guns slung low, and a grim look on his tanned face.

The stranger strolled into the saloon and stood gazing about. Finally his eyes rested on the big hombre standing by the bar talking with the bartender. His face became a grim, cold mask.

Striding over to the bar, he grabbed the man by the shoulder and spun him around.

"Hello, Biff," he said quietly. "Remember me?"

Biff Wilson shrugged off the man's hand and glared at the tall stranger. Then a look of recognition came into his eyes, and he threw back his head to laugh.

"Well if it ain't Tip Logan," he roared. "Come back for more, have yuh?"

"I come back like I said I would, Biff, to even our score," Tip drawled.

With those words young Logan swung a terrific blow to Wilson's jaw. The big man went down heavily, but he sprang up and charged the tall hombre.

Tip side-stepped easily and planted another hay-maker to Biff's face. Then the tall man really went to work. Five times he knocked Wilson down with those terrible right-hand blows. Then he pulled the bully to his feet, smashed him again and again until Biff's face looked like a raw steak.

As much as he wanted to, Tip couldn't continue this sickening work, so he swung his rock-hard fist to end it. The blow lifted Biff from the floor and slammed him against the bar, out cold as an icicle.

Young Tip Logan stood looking down at him with no pity in his eyes.

"Well, I guess that sort of evens up my score with Biff," he said, as he spun on his heel and walked off.

We got sort of fed up on runt stories, so the chances were against this one the moment we started to read it. But we stuck it out, vowing we'd see it through to the bitter end as we do with most of your amateur stories. Then we reached the end, and durned if it *was* bitter. We called it plumb good!

It is a real Western action story, with a pretty good plot and excellent suspense. It is the old story of the runt starting out as a weak kid, then returning and getting the villain after time has made a man of him. It is handled convincingly with a new angle or two. The characters could be stronger, but, darn it, we can't expect *too* much.

Now for:

THE TUMBLEWEED KID

By Burns Sturgill—Age 20
Auxier, Kentucky

When the sun was almost gone, and its last coppery rays slanted upward over saw-toothed crags in the west, a rider loomed against the horizon. He rode from the setting sun over one of the many trails that point like the spokes of a wheel to a spot in the center.

As the skies above him slowly deepened to darkness, the late rider galloped on at an easy pace. He rounded a bend in the trail, then slanted up a rocky incline to Skull Pass. Here, horse and rider paused to gaze off into the distance.

Lights in the far-off town could already be seen.

"Yep, this is the pass, and that's Silver Town. Reckon we're on the right track, old hoss," spoke the rider, as he softly patted his cayuse's neck. "An' if I'm not bad wrong, that feller what wanted help ought to be showin' up purty soon."

The rider was Bill Curry, better known as the Tumbleweed Kid. Though he owned a large spread in Arizona, it was almost impossible to find him there. For after his father was killed and robbed, Bill was ever on the murderer's trail, and so got his name.

The Kid had waited but a few minutes when a horseman dashed into the pass at a fast gallop.

"That you, Kid?" The rider hailed him, as he brought his mount to a stop.

"Yeah," Curry answered. "Why such a hurry, Sim?"

"We got tuh ride fast, son!" Sim Moorse spoke in a hasty voice. "They's a whole flock o' mean-lookin' gents in town tuh-night, and that new sawbones I's tellin' ye 'bout, he ha'n't been seed tuhday. Somethin's goin' tuh pop. Anything happens tuh th' bank I'm sunk."

When Curry and Moorse rode into Silver Town, all was quiet. The two kept to the shadows until they reached the rear of the Town Bank, where they dismounted.

"Look, son," Sim whispered, "th' door's partly open."

Curry eased his guns from leather, and walked with long strides to the door. With one foot he kicked it wide.

A dark figure sprang from the vault and faced the door, only to stare into the yawning muzzles of a pair of .45s.

Fiery eyes blazed hate toward the Tumbleweed Kid through slits in a black mask. From behind it came a muffled curse.

"The Tumbleweed Kid!"

Curry shoved his guns back into leather.

"All right, Mr. Bank Robber," the Kid ground out in a cool voice, "draw!"

The man in the black mask stood for an instant like a statue. Then suddenly his slim, hawkish hands darted with lightning speed, toward hide-out guns, but six-gun thunder crashed, shaking the bank from wall to wall.

A chill seemed to run through the masked man's body, and his glassy eyes showed surprise. Then he pitched forward, red gushing from two holes in his chest. When he hit the floor the mask had slipped down, revealing the face of Carl McWrick, Silver Town's new medico, murderer of Curry's father.

The Tumbleweed Kid holstered his guns and looked down at the still form. His mind wandered back as he whispered a message.

"Rest easy, old man," Curry said softly. "I got 'im."

This is one more added to the amateur collection of yarns about justice riders who travel under the name of Tumbleweed Kid or some other kind of Kid and get their man. The plot of this type of story was never very heavy, and this one is no exception. The characters are only names. It's just an ordinary story that makes the grade largely on good writing.

Not bad, pard, but we think you can do better. Try it!

And here's a poem for you to judge:

STAR OF DEATH

By Peter Droz—Age 21

Torrington, Connecticut

A rope was strung 'round Bucky's neck,
And he was in a plumb tight hole.
The ranchers meant to hang him high
Because a star-flanked mare was stole.

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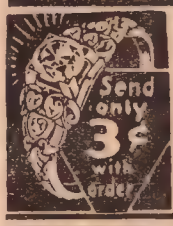

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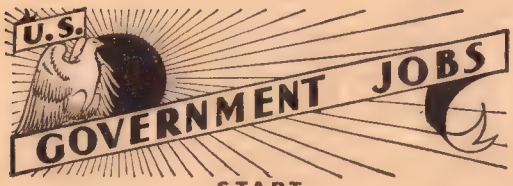

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"Yuh croak like all the hoss thieves does,"
  Snarled Rancher Fally, very frank.
His bronc stretched out the hanging rope;
  It rubbed against the hoss's flank.

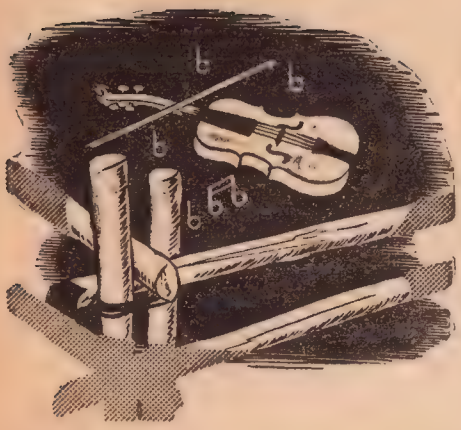
Those vigilantes shouted loud:
  String up the thief and make him dance!"
But Bucky's staring eyes saw truth;
  He hoarsely asked for one last chance.

"I'll prove who is the guilty cuss,"
  The waddy said. "I never lied.
The thief is Fally; thet's the mare.
  Yuh see the star mark on her hide?"

The rope had rubbed, some paint wore off.
  A star sure marked the bronco's flank.
As Bucky rode the thief to jail.
  He had his lucky star to thank.

Before we say "adios," we're reminding you not to forget those true experiences, amigos. That ought to be just your dish, you hombres and gals who'd rather relive your own adventures than make up stories about other people's. And there's real skill required to make an actual experience as vivid for a reader as it was for you.

THE RANGE BOSS.



FIDDLIN' JOE'S SONG CORRAL

This department is for the purpose of preserving the old cowboy songs and Western range ballads, and their history. Readers can help in this work by sending in any such songs that they know, especially those handed down by word of mouth by parents, grandparents, and other old-time Westerners. The story of the song, how it came to be written, and the facts on which it is based should accompany the words whenever possible.

Address all letters to Fiddlin' Joe, care of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

Not long ago I was talking to a friend of mine about folk songs and we were trying to figure out the motive for most of them. We decided upon two fundamental motives. The first was to serve the need for a rhythmical guide for communal work. The second, we decided, was religious worship. I reckon we should have added a third and fourth motive for folk songs: the desire to tell a story in song, and to accompany folk play.

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Canadian readers must remit with order.

usually motivated by the first, or by a combination of the first and third need. Most cowboy songs were made up on the range and sung to the rhythm of the work in hand. Often the rhythm of a song in itself has a usefulness. A quiet song is good to sing alongside of a restive herd of cattle when they're bedding down for the night.

All ballads are narrative songs in a sense. They either serve as a lament of downtrodden races or individuals, or they tell a story of events. They have done that since the days when troubadours traveled over the land and were news carriers. Some of the early ballads lived on beyond the local occasion for their composition because they told a story which was liable to happen to anyone. They lived on and they were revised over and over again to fit the needs of individual singers.

Gerald McIntosh sent us recently a short version of such a ballad. You have had other versions of it under the title of "The Wild Boy" and "Lacky Bill."

MY PARENTS RAISED ME TENDERLY

My parents raised me tenderly, they had no child but me,
But I was bent on gambling and I was bound to spree;
And I became a rover soon, which grieved my heart full sore,
To leave my aged parents that I should see no more.

There was a wealthy gentleman who lived in these same parts
Who had an only daughter, and I had gained her heart.
I told her my intentions were quite soon to cross the plains.
I asked her if she'd prove faithful till I returned again.
Great drops of tears stood in her eyes, her bosom heaved a sigh.
"Fear not," said she. "Young man," said she, "my love can never die."

According to arrangements, I jumped on board a boat,
And for the town of Omaha I merrily did float.
I found the gold was plenty there, and the girls were free and kind;
My love begun to cool a bit for the girl I left behind.

I next set out for Denver to cross the wilder plains,
Where pretty Jenny Ferguson took me by the hand a-sayin',
"If you will consent to marry me all the gold I have is yours."
So I along with Jenny went and married her to be sure.

My father lies in a winding sheet, my mother she disappears,
And the girl I left by her side, kissing off her tears.
It's true I've gold aplenty, and a wife that's always kind,
But still I never can forget the girl I left behind.

One of the most loved songs of the West, and one which is a straight narrative song, is the one about Little Joe the Wrangler. A number of requests have come in from time to time for the song about Little Joe's sister. I'm glad to say I have it here and have obtained permission of the author to sing it with the Corral:

LITTLE JOE, THE WRANGLER'S SISTER NELL

By N. Howard Thorpe

She rode up to the wagon as the sun was getting low,
A slender little figure dressed in gray.
We told her to set down, of course, and pull up to the fire,
And red-hot chuck would soon be on its way.

An old slouch hat with a hole on top was perched upon her head;
A pair of bullhide chaps, well greased and worn;
An old stock saddle, scratched and scarred from working in the brush;
Her slick maguey tied to her saddlehorn,

She said she's rode from Llano, four hundred miles away.
Her pony was so tired it couldn't go.
She asked to stop a day or two and kind of rest him up;
Then maybe she could find her brother Joe.

We could see that she'd been crying, her little face was sad;
When she spoke her upper lip would tremble so.
She was the living image, we all saw at a glance,
Of our little lost horse herder, Wrangler Joe.

We asked where Joe was working, if she knew the outfit's brand.
"Yes, his letter said it was the Circle Bar.
It was mailed at Amarillo about three months ago,
From a trail herd headed north to Cinnabar."

I looked at Jim, he looked at Tom, and then looked back at me.
There was something in our hearts we couldn't speak.
She said she got kind of worried when she never heard no more,
And things at home got tougher every week.

"You see, my mother died," she said, "when Joe and I were born."
So she and Joe were twins, her story ran.
"Then dad, he ups and marries, and gets another wife,
And then it was our troubles sure began.

"She beat us and abused us and starved us most the time;
You see, she had two children of her own.
Nothing Joe or I could do would ever seem just right.
When Joe pulled out that left me all alone."

I gave the kid my bedroll while I bunked with Jim.
We talked and planned and schemed the whole night through,
As to which of us would tell her the way that Joe was killed,
And break the news as gently as we knew.

I heard the horses coming, a-headed into camp.
It wasn't light, but we could plainly hear the bell,
And then some one a-crying, a-coming on behind,
'Twas little Joe the Wrangler's sister Nell.

Valvex
AIR CONDITIONED
ADJUSTABLE CARBURETOR PIPE
THE MODERN PIPE WITH THE ADJUSTABLE CARBURETOR
The air-conditioned VALVEX pipe preserves all the aroma of your favorite tobacco.
The heat of the tobacco at the top of the pipe is carried downward by a simple heat conductor strip, which is connected to the carburetor at the bottom of the pipe. Through this carburetor comes air. It prevents condensation, gumminess, that you always find in conventional pipes. All of the bitter, nicotine-saturated, soggy moisture that you find at the bottom of the conventional pipe. VALVEX is the only pipe that never requires a holiday.
NO MORE SOGGY PIPE BOWLS
NO MORE HALF BURNED, HALF USED TOBACCO
EVERY PIPE MECHANICALLY PRESMOKED
NO BREAKING IN PERIOD
STUDY THIS SIMPLE X-RAY DIAGRAM
VALVEX AIR CONDITIONED
It shows you how air-conditioning is possible in this marvel pipe, the Valvex, by means of the patented regulating valve. Because of the cool under-draught, the pipe stays lit longer. A cool sweet smoke from preheated tobacco is assured. To the man who has always wanted to smoke a pipe but disliked the breaking it in or the unpleasantness of a mouthful of evil tasting nicotine saturated moisture, here is the answer—
AMERICAN MULTI PRODUCTS CORP.
38-08 Twenty-ninth St., L. I. City, N. Y.
Enclosed find $1.50 (check or money order) for my VALVEX in the shape that I have checked.
Smooth briar ☐ Rough briar ☐
(check shape desired)
Name _____
Address _____

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M. M. EARNED $267, three weeks, raising mushrooms in cellar! Exceptional, but your cellar, shed perhaps suitable. We buy crops. Book free. United, 3848 Lincoln Ave., Dept. 534, Chicago.

Cartooning

FREE details! Learn Original Cartooning! Raye Burns School, Studio S-1, Box 2194, Cleveland, Ohio.

We couldn't quite console her—she'd seen
the horses' brands
As she drove them from the river's bank
below.
From the look upon our faces, she seemed
to realize,
She ne'er again would see poor Wrangler
Joe.

And here's a short one to end this week's session with:

HOW

By Robert V. Carr

I'd like to meet you anywhere,
Along the sunset trail;
An' roll with you a cigarette,
An' hear a range-land tale.
I'd like to hear you drawlin' speak,
That word that rhymes with cow,
An' tastes o' sage an' alkali—
That little old word, "How."

I'd like to sight you from a rise
Upon the Big Divide;
I bet I'd know you from the way—
The reckless way—you ride.
I bet I'd yell— Aw, blame the luck!
I'd give the world jes' now,
To hear the pound o' hoofbeats an'
That little old word, "How."

Fer "Charmed, I'm sure," an' soft handshake
Of high society,
Someway, don't never git its rope
Upon the heart o' me.
I want to beat you on the back,
In joyous, friendly row,
An' call you names—I want to hear
That little old word "How."

There you be, and we'll have more like this from time to time. So long for now, and good luck!

RUNNING W

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More MEN *and* WOMEN *WANTED AT ONCE!*

Be a Food Distributor ... BIG CASH PROFITS!

COMPLETE DISPLAY OUTFIT

Here's your big chance! Now you can have a fascinating, simple-to-run, home-owned business with a wonderful opportunity to make good money at once and all year 'round. Or, if you just want some **extra money** you can turn a few hours of your time each week into cash to help you buy clothes, pay off your home, educate your children, and enjoy luxuries you've always longed to have.

To an honest, reliable man or woman in any open locality I will give—FREE—complete equipment containing absolutely everything needed to run this simple, dignified little business. I am also willing to extend liberal credit, so you can build a fine, permanent business on my capital.

The nation-wide success of my Food Distributor Plan is largely due to the **powerful and instant appeal of good things to eat!** There's scarcely a man, woman or child who doesn't love deliciously tempting pies, biscuits, puddings and other food delights. Wouldn't you like to turn this universal appeal into **cash for yourself?** Wouldn't you like the exclusive rights to all the profits waiting to be made in your locality on this nationally famous line? A guaranteed high quality line that includes not only these tempting food specialties, but also over 100 other **fast-selling, quick-repeating** household necessities.

Big cash profits await you in this complete line of food products, including high quality Coffee, Teas, Spices, Flavoring Extracts, etc. In addition you will have marvelous time-and-labor-saving laundry and kitchen supplies and many other daily household necessities always in big demand. A constant stream of attractive Premium Offers and remarkable Bargain Sales help

Now FREE!

make your business a profitable, fascinating, all-year- 'round occupation.

I will give you—FREE—a complete, valuable Display Outfit, including a large assortment of regular full-size packages of my most popular products; a simple, sure-fire Plan which anyone can follow; samples to give away; and a big beautiful catalog filled with appetizing illustrations and descriptions.

Splendid Cash Profits

You owe it to yourself to write and see what wonderful success so many others have enjoyed with this simple money-making plan. Let me mail you full particulars—then you can judge whether you want to start right in making money at once. In addition to your fine cash earnings, you can get food products and over 100 other daily household necessities for your own use at wholesale prices—so you can **save** money as well as **make** money.

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This is a sincere offer made by a big, reliable, old-established company operating from Coast to Coast. Write at once for full particulars. Unless you take advantage of my remarkable Free Outfit Offer now, you may be missing the very money-making opportunity you have been looking for. Strike out for yourself! Be independent! Make money! Enjoy life! Remember—you don't send me a penny. Just fill out and send the coupon and I will mail you full particulars. Do this TODAY!

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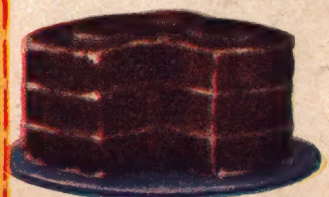
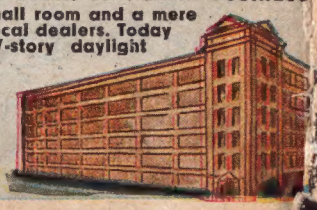


Above are shown just a few of the many delicious foods that can be made in a jiffy with the ready-prepared products in this nationally-famed line.

THE SIMPLE STORY OF A GREAT BUSINESS

1907—one small room and a mere handful of local dealers. Today—a huge, 7-story daylight plant, branch warehouses, and a great nation-wide dealer organization.



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